



ARLIE GELSTON

BY ROGER L. SERGEL

ARLIE GELSTON



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P A R T O N E

CHAPTER I

HOME

I

IRON in hand, Mrs. Gelston paused to squint through the silvery distortion of the kitchen window. Rain had been falling all night and all the long forenoon, bogging the roads, flushing gutters, and spreading in thin pools over the streets. The rain had fallen until now its slant striation was a faintly permanent grain of the near houses and of the distant red and slate-gray buildings of Main Street, standing three blocks distant beyond a length of soaked garden and pasture. As Mrs. Gelston made out the figure of some one walking down the cement walk at the pasture's edge her bleached face broke into wrinkles concentric about her spectacles and weak mouth; then, as the figure grew definite and she saw that it was a youth encased in a familiar raincoat, the larger wrinkles disappeared, leaving the many traces of easy and shallow emotions—a face of unhealthy vacuity relieved by eyes of a startling animal blue. "Sure, that's Phil," she muttered, and stepped back to the ironing board.

The rain was still touching the window and the pane in the back door; and through these openings unshadowing light fell on a greasy confusion—the worktable with its unwashed dishes; the range with pots and kettles shoved to one side to make room for the flatirons; the cupboard with doors opened upon top-heavily piled cups

and plates, broken biscuits, and mice tracks. By one pile of dishes lay an unset trap.

Occasionally Mrs. Gelston looked into the dining-room, where browning geranium plants sat on the window sill, and the oilcloth on the table held the egg remains of a meal. An opposite door out of the dining-room framed a length of hall, in the farther end of which stared the kaleidoscopic pattern of the front door glass—red, yellow, and blue. Steps sounded on the porch, the door flew open, and the boy in the raincoat stamped his feet heavily as he slammed it shut.

"That you, Phil?" Mrs. Gelston inquired nasally.

"Can't you see?" As he brushed past the dining-room table, his coat flapped a protruding knife to the floor.

"Now Phil, don't you be impudent. I didn't know but maybe it was your pa." She hung a camisole over the back of a chair.

"You mighta known. You ain't heard Twenty-four come in, have you? I thought not. And you never seen pa home before it come, did you? And you can bet your life you won't today, neither." Phil flung his hat through the door at a dining-room chair, uncovering a head of nondescript hair over a convex face that held the opaque blue eyes of his mother.

"Say, I gotta have something to eat. I'm hungry. What you got around this joint, anyway?"

"Huh, you talk like you had to get back to school right away, or had a job or something. The sooner you get the idea we're goin' to have just three meals a day the better it'll be for you. Nowt school's out I'm going to have a vacation as well as you and Arlie. You can wait till pa comes home, and we'll eat together, like a family should." As Mrs. Gelston spoke her wrinkles augmented each other.

Phil replied from the cupboard where he was rummaging through cans and jars: "I got to get back. Maybe I

have got a job. Anyway old Z. T. Morse told me to come in this afternoon."

"What, you working in a hardware store? What do you know about hardware?"

"Much as I need to, prob'ly. Ain't a fellow got to learn *sometime*? Come on now, ain't we goin' to eat?"

"You just let me finish this bundle and I'll get you something. Or call Arlie. Wait, though—I hate to take her from cleaning the upstairs rooms. No, go ahead; I ain't heard her for an hour or more."

Going to the dining-room door he bawled: "Arlie, come on down and get me some dinner." With hands on the jambs he waited for an answer; none came. Then, with rising petulance: "Arlie!" And when again the silence grew loud he turned disgustedly. "Aw, she ain't there, ma."

"She is too," his mother answered; "only she don't want to hear. But I'm through now. I'll get you something myself. Won't I give it to that girl though. She gets more irresponsible every day. You get some of that steak out of the ice-box, Phil."

Potatoes were sliced, and a pail of lard and a blackened skillet produced. "Now Phil, you start the steak fryin' and don't use too much lard. I'm going to give that girl something worse'n the worst talking-to *she* ever got."

2

Mrs. Gelston assisted her plump form up the stairs by clutching the thin banister, from which Arlie, in her tomboy phase, and Philip, of right, had worn the varnish, giving it a subdued lustre. Ten years before, when Arlie had been nine and Philip seven, the Gelstons had bought the house, which was still mortgaged. At that time there had been plans for remodelling: a wall

knocked out, a newel post with a lamp, a bathroom. Oliver Gelston had owned a grocery store then, and such things had seemed possible. But put off from year to year the improvements became smoke and vanished when in 1907, caught with large debts, Oliver Gelston had been forced to sell at a loss. In the five years since that time he had done odd jobs of carpentry about the town, had worked as a section hand, and later, since he had had some experience as a telegrapher in his younger days, had become station agent at Coon Falls. The salary from such a position had allowed the carrying out of no dreams other than living as best one might, selling tickets, posting freight tariffs before the inspector arrived, and keeping in action a house and a family that mercifully did not increase.

But such a form of existence had dispersed any organized plans of Mamie Gelston for advancement into that group which always makes its entity felt to those without it, however amorphous, at first glance, the democracy of the Iowa small town may seem. She had been forced into foggy attempts at economy of management by the growing demands of her children and the only slightly increased salary of her husband. The house, in its roominess at least, had seemed too great a strain upon pocket-book and energies, and its unchanged, provoking solidity had rubbed her soul to a spotty rawness; though as the latter half of middle age closed upon her, the process of the home, the fitting of a desire to a place rather than a place to a desire, had partially wrought upon her its ancient effect. For two or three years now she had complained but little of the house, turning rather to an offended adoration of her son, and to a febrile surveillance of her husband and daughter.

It was not now a regard for discipline nor offense at

work delayed that took her upstairs. Rather it was the need of outlet for the petty bitternesses the morning's grayly sibilant void had let grow within her. But strangely, the return of her son and the ascent through the moist dimness of the remotely lit stairway weakened the determination that had thumped the first step.

3

She paused in the upstairs hall and tucked into place a wisp of the yellow hair that, drawn thinly back to an unlovely knot, shone on her head as a polish.

"Arlie," she called, "where are you?"

In the silence that followed she flung open the nearest door, disclosing the front bedroom, which had waited years for a guest who had never come, and wherein reposed a cherry set, its warmth of color diminished by the guest room chill of the stiff white curtains and unused dustiness of the commode.

"Not cleaned yet," she commented. "What on earth has that girl been doing? Arlie, where are you?" Down the hall she tramped to the back bedroom, where a door stood ajar, and stepped into the room. At last her eyes found a thin girl crouched in a corner between the wall and bed, some sheets of paper in her hand, unrestrained dark hair shadowing the flushed hollow cheeks of a narrow but evenly featured face, the nose high but fine. Her eyes, blue as the mother's were not, with a soft mineral-like color, stared through the window.

"Mooning!" Mrs. Gelston broke out. "Always mooning! Haven't you got one grain of common sense? Here I send you upstairs to clean these rooms, and what you done? Nothing! You just set and set, and waste

the best part of the day, and here's your brother got to get back to town right away or lose a good job, and now prob'ly he *will* lose it—just for lack of a dinner. But if I want to get *you* to help I got to chase upstairs after you, just to find you reading! What's that stuff you got there? Let me see it."

The girl had not moved from her original position, though at the last words her eyes dropped to the sheets in her hands, which, after a moment's contemplation, she handed over as if to justify her indolence.

Mrs. Gelson snatched the sheets—hotel notepaper, scrawled on irregularly in a faded ink—and adjusted her spectacles.

"Where'd you find these?" she asked sharply. "Them was never meant for you to read. They shoulda been burnt long ago. You just give me all you got, and trot downstairs and get to work. You can finish the rooms later."

"Was you and pa engaged very long, ma?" The question fell out of an abstraction broken for the first time.

"None of your business. People didn't go to such flummeriness when I was young." Mechanically Mrs. Gelson had begun to read, sitting down on the bed heavily, smiling faintly. Some of her wrinkles returned.

"You and pa musta had an awful good time together before you was married, ma." Arlie shifted her position to sit cross-legged, smoothing the skimpy gingham over her knees.

Mrs. Gelson folded the letter with a smirk. "Gee, I guess we did, though . . . I did, anyway. Why, I don't think none of you girls has the good time I did, and I'll tell you what, too—I had your pa going in them days. Why I could make that man do anything I wanted. Everybody said so. Hanging around Cora

Peterson, he was, when I met him, but maybe I didn't send her packing! Then he went to work on the Northwestern over at Cedar Rapids, and used to write me three times a week. He was just crazy about me. Sometimes every day he'd write, and he'd just get blind mad when he found I'd been going with anybody else."

"Did you go with anybody *else*, ma?"

"Lord yes! I should say I did. Think I's going to moon over his letters? Why most of the time I was getting 'em I was going with Phil Yoder. I used to show him your pa's letters. Ho! maybe he wasn't mad when I told him I'd been doing it, once. I named your brother after Phil Yoder. Your pa didn't seem to care much by that time, somehow." She paused, as at a disturbed recollection. "Phil, last I heard of him, owned most two sections out in Boone County and had two big cars and a Ford to run around in, and used to go out to California in the winter. That old cat Fan Wylie wrote me all about it. Met him at the Iowa picnic out there one year. *She* knew I mighta got him, and she knew what I got, too. Gee, if I'd only 'a' kept my head, and all. But then, how's I to know his brother was going to die; and he got his uncle's farm too. . . . Besides, Oliver, he lived in town, and I was sick to death of picking up cobs in the hog lot."

"It'd been awful nice to go to California, ma."

"Of course it would. That's what I told your pa, too, more'n once. If he hadn't been gassing around all the time, just like you, he might of amounted to something. Instead of that—look at him."

Eagerness sharpened Arlie's face and eyes. "Gee, ma, if you'd married Phil Yoder, I coulda had a wrist watch and a lavalliere, and . . ."

"I know, I know. I cried my eyes out more'n once,

I have. But it's all done and there's no undoing it. We love and we learn—that's what they say, anyhow. Only not always. Sometimes I sorta hoped for you. You ain't so bad looking."

"Was you as pretty as I am, ma?"

"Pretty as you! My God, child, you're pretty, in a way, but you just ask your Aunt Min sometime about me. Not that she'd admit much though. *You* take after your pa. A little you look like his oldest sister, Marie. They was all set I wasn't going to marry Oliver, but I showed 'em. Why"—with rising voice—"I had that man wrapped round my little finger, and that's what you can do if you're good looking, and keep your head."

"What d'you mean by—"

"Now look here, Arlie, you'll know what you need to as soon as you need to. Give me the resta them letters; you got some under your dress." Mrs. Gelston bunched them together, then unfolded another.

As her mother read Arlie waited, thought running its subtle indications in her face. There had been parental, at least maternal, injunctions before, but never had they been more than phrases dropped from the height of age and of bread and butter authority. Today the words came as nervous gestures having causes found in experiences remote, differently featured, yet essentially the same as those she had scented in chance contacts with boys, in high school banter, cloakroom insinuations. Here was a longer view of such concerns, distant and panoramic, not fragmentary—for her mother had passed through harmless intrigues, an engagement of a sort, marriage, and family making. With a face carefully not too righteous, she fixed her eyes on her mother.

"I'd just like to read Oliver Gelston this," Mrs. Gelston broke out. "Just listen, now, Arlie: 'I haven't seen a

girl in Cedar Rapids to put up beside you, Mamie. You have them all beat. There is lots of blondes here, but none of them has hair like yours or complexions either. I don't blame P. Y.' (that's Phil Yoder) 'for trying to cut me out. Only he can't do it, can he, Mamie? I hope we can be married quick, now, for I got my raise and maybe I'll get transferred to Clinton.' Now you never heard your pa say anything like that lately, did you, Arlie? Or ever? No siree. Oliver Gelston ain't done a word but grumble since I married him."

"Go on, ma. What else's he say?"

Mrs. Gelston read on, silently, for a letter or two; the sheets littering the patchwork quilt on the bed. Then again, suddenly: "I had him where I wanted him, then, I tell you. Listen now: 'I don't care much, Mamie, if you go to a dance with P. Y. I can't expect you not to have any good times just because I'm not there to take you. But you be careful. If I found him doing anything like you know what, I don't know what I'd do, honest I don't, Mamie.' As if he could have done anything to Phil! Why, Phil was big as two of him!" Indignation gave her voice light nasal gleams as she continued. "'So you better be careful. You have your good time but remember you're going to marry me.' Yes, I remembered all right—far as *he* knows—and look what I get for it, work, work—"

The pause that hung between mother and daughter, huge and gleaming, was broken as a bubble by steps in the lower hall, whistling, and the slam of a door.

"My God!" Mrs. Gelston jumped from the bed and trotted around it to the hall, tossing the letters into disorder on the dresser. "Phil's dinner! I clean forgot it!"

At a lingering pace and with a slow look at the letters,

Arlie followed. In the kitchen she found her mother sniffing the skillet. "I thought so," she was saying. "It's your fault, too, Arlie, making me chase you all over the house. Phil musta used half a pound of butter frying that steak!"

Again the front door opened and shut, this time to let in Oliver Gelston, who came down the hall shaking the water from his coat—a thin, tall man with a meagre face nervously alert under a shock of black hair. His blue eyes were like his daughter's.

"Dinner ready yet?" he inquired, dropping into a dining-room chair. "I see you had something ready for Phil, anyway."

"There you go," his wife answered. "Start to grouch around before you give me a chance." She started peeling potatoes. "No, I ain't got dinner ready, but you can see I'm getting it."

"I suppose I got to wait for potatoes to boil. I notice you had some fried for Phil. He don't have to wait, ever." He waved a hand toward Phil's empty plate.

"Yes, that's it. Phil got his own dinner I'd like you to know. Not that *you'd* ever do that. But you can stop blaming me. Arlie, see if Phil took all that steak."

"Course he did," Gelston put in.

"Yep, it's all gone." Arlie reported from the ice box.

"Well, he needed it. A growing boy always needs more'n the rest of us. Clear off the table, Arlie, and set us some places."

Gelston sank lower in his chair with a newspaper.

"The rain's quitting," he announced later.

"Sabout time," his wife answered from the stove.
"What made you so late?"

"Twenty-four's held up by a wash-out. Then there was a lot of express—bills for the Fourth of July celebra-

tion. Old Z. T. Morse's been crazy for 'em near two weeks now. I had to call him up and then wait for him to come get 'em."

"Humph, he won't get much done this afternoon."

"Oh, I don't know. The rain's over. He'll get 'em out as soon as he can, you bet. Mapleton's had its bills out near a week."

"Now I wonder if Z. T. wanted Phil to post bills this afternoon. Phil said he asked him to step in. He kinda thought he might be going to give him a job in the store. But I'll bet it's them bills."

"Shouldn't wonder."

Arlie, setting the table, watched her father intently, waiting for that openness to suggestion in his tired, hungry, rainy day mood that shortly signalled itself by a recrossing of legs and an abstracted gaze at the table.

"Are we going to have a big celebration, pa?"

Gelston raised his head to look at her. "What do you care? You spent all your money on that dress for your birthday," he said, with the rudiment of a grin, and added soothingly: "Yep, we're going to have quite a doings. There's going to be horse races and a parade, and speeches, and a baseball game. Quite a time they're going to have."

"Is that all, pa?"

"Well, let's see. There's going to be a wrestling match and a potato race and three-legged races, and the G. A. R. fife and drum corps. Old Isaac Pfannebecker'd have to toot it up a bit or it wouldn't be a Fourth of July, according to his notion. There's going to be a dance, too, I guess."

"Is 'er?" Arlie stooped to pick up a fallen knife as her mother's voice rasped in high notes from the kitchen.

"You needn't think you're going to no dance, miss.

Not at your age. Public ones at that. Ain't you got no decency? Every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the country'll be at them dances."

"Well ma, I'm past age and I can too go, can't I, pa?" Arlie came to the kitchen door, where she could more effectively defy the one parent and appeal to the other.

"We'll see," her father said; "there's plenty time."

"There now," Arlie darted her words. "Pa says I can go, pract'ly."

"Arlie Gelston! He said no such thing! Think I ain't got no ears? He said, "We'll see." And you can just bet we will, too. You got the table set yet? Then take up the bacon and eggs."

Oliver threw his coat over another chair and sat up to the table. Arlie appeared with a platter, her mother followed with the potatoes, and the meal began. Oliver, trying to mash the elusively hard potatoes, finally looked up through his ruffled and overhanging hair to remark: "Seems to me you mighta got the potatoes *done*. You've had since noon to do 'em."

There followed an intermittent invective from his wife, until, the clamor of her own stomach stilled as well as that of his, the meal went on in munching silence, Oliver intent on his own needs; but his back was a little bent, spring-like, as if in readiness for defensive reaction against some grievance that was sure to reëmerge. Arlie, facing the window, ate but little as she studied the face of her father and then that of her mother.

Standing at the window a moment after her father had left the house, she saw his stooped form walking toward town. The rain had ceased and over the buildings of Main Street a patch of blue glowed among whitening clouds. The yellow of sudden sunlight cast Gelston's shadow behind him. From his pocket he extracted a

plug of tobacco, and biting persistently into it dragged his feet toward the station.

4

Arlie turned to her mother, who sat with elbows on the table, picking her teeth pensively.

"What'll I do now, ma?"

"You can do these dishes. I guess now it's stopped raining I'll run over to Mrs. Engberg's a minute and take back that butter."

In five minutes she had talked her way to the front door, and closed it upon a house wherein the silence reeked with late presences; but it opened to Arlie a free, leisurely period of busyness, in which, after her own fashion, the dishes were washed and put away.

Still her mother had not come home. Arlie went upstairs to the back bedroom where the letters still lay in disorder.

Squatted by the window she hastily fingered the decaying papers, many of them yellow railroad manila. She looked first for the one her mother had read, but it yielded little more than had been given to her. Progressively, however, the others cast a faded light on a trivial cross-section of other years: the obtaining of railroad passes, the complications thereof; a dispute with Soderquist, apparently a boss; a box of cigars at Christmas, recollections of a dance at Boone and a certain polka; what old man Herman would say when he found out what Nina had done; Laura's last fellow, whom Oliver had seen on his way to Chicago, where he had a job promised in a commission house. Yet vitally dim in the faded light were the passings and recrossings of that remote, tantalizing yet somehow perfect reality. Little of

love. With a disappointed eagerness Arlie drew from one of the half dozen remaining envelopes two sheets scrawled across in a hand larger and hastier than the others.

"*Dear Mamie,*

"If you are going to marry me you got no right to bum around with Phil Yoder as you been doing. Dont think I dont know. You kept me fooled alright when I was in Boone but I found out some things. Ben Phetteplace rode with me Sunday night as far as Marshalltown and told me what he knew. He said Phil Yoder was talking all over town one night when he was drunk about that ride he had with you after the basket social and dance out at Favor's Grove. How you was dead gone on him and he near got you that night, and *would* the next time. I won't stand for that, Mamie and you know it. If you love me you got to quit going with other fellows and you got to quit letting them love you around. How do I know where its going to stop. You hardly let me kiss you lately and you let him do darn near as he pleases with you. Now do you love me or not and are you going to marry me. If you are you better be thinking of me sometimes. Cant you wait three months. We will be married as soon as I get transferred to Clinton. That is we will if you stick to me, but if you go on as you been going on I am done with you. It breaks my heart, Mamie I love you more than I can tell you but there is some things I wont stand for. Its up to you to decide if you want Phil Yoder you cant have me and if you try to get him I bet you get left Mamie honest I do. He is just playing with you thats all. And did you ever hear of me cutting up with any other girls but you. No and I havent either. Sometimes I wanted you so much I thought I was going to burn out my insides, but you bet I played straight by you Mamie and you do the same by me.

"OLIVER."

The accidental dropping of this acid upon the illusions that were her father and mother galvanized her to vague

action. She stood up. Her eyes gazed without sight at the blackened back yard dropping toward the barn, but she saw only injustice, her mother had gone to dances—she had done dimly worse than go to dances.

An immature leer of satisfied curiosity marked her mouth and eyes, and still she stood there. Under the dark brown hair her hot and wondering face with its high cheek bones held eyes lighted from within by indignation.

In the Gelston household she might have been one of the daughterly drudges who serve time for their mothers' incompetence had it not been for the interposition of her own developing will. That enabled her to find sunlight and air through the intervals offered by her mother's inveterate changefulness.

Her father sometimes helped with a rekindling of whatever authority he had once possessed, but that authority had never been large. In the first years of marriage he had wanted whatever sexual companionableness his wife's nature permitted to be given in other than animal seizure or protest, and so he tried to smoothe out her innumerable wrinklings of spirit by acquiescence. That failing, and when, after the first years had passed, nothing but unillumined breeding remained—he was capable of more—he had been acquiescent in order that his mind might be free for the romanticizing of whatever work he happened to have. At present he succeeded in thinking that the branch line station at Coon Falls was an important element in the nation's consequential business.

That afternoon Arlie's father and mother, alternately diminished and magnified by the lapse of time which the letters made substantial, and translated into the heightened characters of lovers, assumed a bright distorted significance. They had been, and they passed through, what lay more colorfully before her, tantalizingly formless. She viewed that future brightness from a stupor-

ous murk of questions, questions whose uncoiling heads roused only to slip again into the long darkness of her childhood and adolescence.

For minutes she stood there, and then for a bound hour sat brooding before arriving at even so indefinite a decision that in her mother were no answers. She would try to talk to her father a little. Drawn, she was, to the hungry incompetence of his face, to the unacknowledged dream that would limn it momentarily. Perhaps he could throw light where her mother could not. . . .

Already Ned Rickenberg had spoken of the Fourth of July dance; probably he would ask her to go. She must give him the chance by seeing him at the Bijou Saturday night: most of the boys went to the movies in the hope of "picking up" some girl.

Ned had left high school to work in an implement house, and his wages gave him an admired independence among the older high school boys. Twice he had brought her home from parties, and one Sunday afternoon they had walked up the railroad track a mile or two, very publicly it had seemed to Arlie. If he really did ask her to the dance, they might, she thought, be considered as "going together." He hadn't tried to kiss her yet, but when they were coming home from the second party her mother had opened the door before they had even reached the front walk.

Tonight she might have a chance at her father if he were in the right mood.

She seized the broom, standing idle by the door, and began a vigorous commotion.

5

After supper that night, when Phil had gone to town and Mrs. Gelston had again run over to a neighbor's,

leaving Arlie to wash the dishes, her father strolled into the kitchen.

"Got any matches here, Arlie?"

"Right on the stove there, pa. My hands is wet."

Gelston lit his pipe and puffing it leaned against the jamb. "Things go all right today, Arl?"

"I guess so."

"Ain't you sure?"

"Why yes. . . . But say, pa, I want to ask you a question."

"Ask away."

Arlie flung the tea-towel over the wooden fingers and put away the last of the dishes. Turning she smoothed her dress over her slim hips; her thick brows contracted. "You see, pa, I want to ask you . . ." Her face grew blank, she paused.

"Yes, go on. What d'you want to ask me?"

"I want to ask . . ." Her mind was of a sudden vacantly stormy. What *did* she want to ask?

"Oh, I—well nothing I guess, not now."

Gelston shoved himself from his leaning position. "What's eating you tonight?" he said, and returned to a dining-room chair and his newspaper.

Self-consciously Arlie sped past him to her own room, where, watching the sleepy haze of light above Main Street, she thoughtfully undressed. Unsnapping her corset she said aloud, "What was it I was going to ask him, anyway?" and in bed she stared for a long time at what was caused by the faint commingling of distant lights, that made the sky, if not visible, obscurely felt and there.

CHAPTER II

DEPOT AND MOVIES

I

ON the Saturday night preceding the Fourth Arlie closed the front door behind her and stepped into the soft warm evening, an evening circled by an orange radiance of sunset and mellowed by growth of shadow. Her white and blue gingham brightly focussed whatever light still loitered over street and field as she walked to the Ritchies' to meet Belle, her chum of the season. They were going to the Bijou.

"Gee, kid, I's afraid you weren't coming," Belle cried as Arlie neared the porch. Together they went on, a contrasting couple, Belle, well dressed—for Coon Falls—plump, with a waxy face heavily powdered, eyes that were to blue as cabbage leaves are to green, and a fluff of yellow hair.

"First, let's go to the station to see the Flyer come in, Arlie."

"Pa don't like to have me down there."

"Oh, shucks, he won't care this time. You don't need to let him see you. Besides, things won't be going good at the Bijou for a while. 'Tain't eight yet."

"I know, the boys hardly ever come till then."

"Ho! ho!" Belle laughed uproariously. "Thinking of boys all the time." She shoved Arlie away with a vigorous arm. "Guess you'd like to see Ned Rickenberg all right!"

Arlie regained the sidewalk and continued sedately, though her voice was raised in answer. "Why Belle Ritchie, I'm no more gone on boys than you are! I guess you're not one to talk. And who's wanting to go to the depot, anyway?"

"Aw kid, I didn't mean nothing." Belle put a propitiatory fat arm about Arlie's waist. "You know that."

"Well, it seemed like it. But it don't matter. . . . I thought you was going to save that georgette for the Fourth."

"Ma said I should, but I couldn't help wearing it tonight. Sorta get used to it, so I can enjoy myself the Fourth." Then, in a lower tone of great earnestness: "Has Ned asked you to the dance?"

"Has Jake asked you?" Arlie parried.

"No, he ain't, and I don't know what to think. I see him with Ned today though. They're bumming around together, I guess. Ned ain't asked you, has he?"

"He sorta spoke about it once, said something about if they had one, but he ain't asked me yet. And I don't care if he don't. I guess *my* Fourth won't be spoiled."

"Oh, I don't *care*, either. Only it seems as if they're going to they might be about it. How do they know we're going to stick around waiting for 'em?" Belle turned a placid face, unruffled by her indignation.

"Well if they don't I guess we can go together. Though we're 'most too old to go and hang around without any fellows. It don't look right."

"I wonder would they be at the depot tonight?"

"We can see the Flyer come in, anyway," said Arlie.

Main Street in Coon Falls curves from a straight line for the descent of a long hill, at the foot of which and at the end of the ski-shaped street, stands the station.

A board walk runs down the outer curve of the street, stopping with the brick platform and the low building, which is painted a discouraged red.

The girl's chatter nervously hushed itself as they entered the waiting-room and stood just inside the door. Disappointment sobered their faces. On the worn characterless benches sat a dozen people in varying attitudes of vacancy and discomfort, half of them staring listlessly at the opposite wall, the others talking in the low tones of a doctor's anteroom. Behind the grille in the corridor leading to the men's waiting-room Arlie saw the green eyeshade under her father's forward-flung hair.

"Let's sorta see whether the train's on time," Belle ventured.

"Wait till pa's gone."

"Aw shucks, wha'd'you care? Come on." Belle walked over to look at the board, throwing an elaborately casual glance into the men's waiting-room, and came back to report. "Ain't no one there. Let's go outside," she said, and pushed Arlie through the door into the gathered dusk. The red shell-rim of day remained, fading rapidly. Overhead the stars were coming, with a breeze and coolness. Knots of people had by this time collected outside, so that Arlie and Belle had to edge their way single file toward the farther end of the station.

"D'you suppose they're here at all?" Arlie queried when they found themselves in a free space beyond the baggage truck. "Maybe they went to the Bijou after all."

"Maybe. Anyway, let's wait till the train comes."

Slowly they came to the end of the platform. Beyond lay a strip of cinders, and in the distance rose the top-heavy bulk of the water-tank, sharply black against the warm night blue. Beside the tank's supporting timbers they could make out three or four figures, with the white effect of dresses appearing and being blotted out. A

match spurted and a face flared behind cupped hands.

"Arlie, that's Ned Rickenberg. Did you see?"

"Shucks, you can't see so far off."

"I can too. He's got some girls with him. There's another fellow there, too."

"Prob'bly Jake McCaffrey."

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Maybe it's not them. What they doing down there, anyway?"

"Waiting for the train, you nut. Let's go back. If they saw us they'd think we was following 'em. I wouldn't follow *them* for a thousand dollars!"

"Me neither. Let's hurry." They mingled again with the people on the platform, and at last a murmur arose: "There she comes." A spoke of pale light wavered across the sky, and a yellowish-white brilliance crowned the stretch of track, the nebulosity enlarging as the train climbed the long hill. A whistle crooned through the air, and suddenly the huge darkness of the steel elevator across the track was a lighted monolith, stark silver against the darkened sky. The faraway brilliance gathered to a hard raying gem, the engine rumbled over the crest of the hill, the long rails gleamed and a flying radiance flung itself over platform and crowd. The shuffling shadows of the moving group revealed hard bright portraits of a wrinkled old man, a tight-lipped, brown-eyed mother, a Swede's ruddy face. The tremble of earth, the black roar, the rush of the engine, dimness thrown over the crowd as a blanket: then the spotted light from the car windows with the hot yellow interiors, a screeching of steel on steel and the long relief of escaping steam. The crowd contracted to the hardness of a taut muscle, and the two girls, compressed into its substance, were borne with it.

Extricating themselves they squirmed at last to the shelter of the station wall, where they could observe the coming and the departing.

"Look, Arlie, there's old man Riddlesbarger. Been to see his daughter, I bet."

"Yes, but look who's coming here." Arlie pointed to two couples hastening from the water-tank. "Look Belle — Ned and Jake."

The boys, with a suitcase in one hand and a girl's arm in the other, pressed into the throng about the car entrance; the girls were chatting volubly: "Now Ned, don't you forget what you promised. Jake, gimme that picture you swiped. Gimme it! There's just time. Or I won't give you no dances the Fourth."

Belle turned to look significantly at Arlie, but Arlie stared straight ahead.

Soon the couples had piled into the car; the boys flung the suitcases into the racks and came off.

"'Board," the conductor shouted.

Just as the train started one of the departing girls frantically opened a window. Poking her head out she called, "Now Ned, you be good till I see you on the Fourth. I don't care how bad you are then."

A laugh flowed from the men on the platform; heads in the car turned to see who had spoken. Ned waved a hand. "Don't worry, old kid, I'll be there all right."

Then the train, through a puffing crescendo attained continuous volume, the red lamps winked diminishingly down the track, leaving a buzz of silence. Those who wished could again be conscious of starlight.

"Come on, Arlie. We'll be late to the Bijou."

"Look out. We don't want to catch up with them. They might think we came down here to find *them*."

"Humph. I'd like to see 'em think it," Belle rejoined. D'you suppose they're going to have those girls down for the Fourth, really?"

"Course. Didn't you hear 'em? That one that yelled to Ned must have been twenty-two or three. Plumpish, too."

A rival's plumpness did not worry Belle. "Come on, then. Let's hurry."

As they ascended the hill Arlie changed her views. Plainly the thing to be done was to ignore Ned and Jake completely. "We'll sail right past them," Arlie plotted in a low voice, "and don't you notice 'em at all. If you do I'll never speak to you again, Belle Ritchie."

"I! I wouldn't speak to them—not, not for anything," Belle affirmed in a weak universal.

Accordingly, when the level street was gained, the girls increased their pace and swerving largely to one side walked swiftly past the boys.

"Hey, where you kids think you're going?" Ned called after them.

Belle turned her head, but faced front at a rapid clutch on her arm and an admonitory jab from Arlie, who with head bent was almost running. When they had passed about twenty people they slowed down, but not without another backward look by Belle.

"What's the matter with you, kid?" Arlie asked, sharply. "Ain't you got no sense?"

"They mighta taken us to the Bijou."

"Huh, wha'd'you care? What's a dime anyway? You won't go broke, will you?"

3

The Bijou, a white space in the dimly illumined street, shone before them, heliotropic gnats buzzing about its lights, and about the illumined marquée over the red, blue and brown posters. Heliotropic human beings gossiped in twos and threes, or stood idle on the curb in light-stunned contemplation. In the dark misty outlands were fields, barns, hogs, work of the week. Here the world condensed its marvel, flying on the screen. . . .

Arlie and Belle passed inside the white doors, their

tickets being taken by a weary, gray-haired, muscular-faced old man, Gran'pa Tritchler.

Stuffiness assailed them as they pressed against a pack of unseated people. Straining on tip-toe they made out the last flickerings of a chase: the tramp jumping a river and fat policemen balked at the river's brim. They could only wait for the intermission.

"I hardly recognized Jessie Tritchler selling tickets. When'd she come back, Belle?"

"Just lately. Wasn't that some do she had on her hair?"

"She'd a lot of paint on, too."

"Course she did. Just plastered on. That's her husband running the machine now. Somers his name is. Went broke in Sioux City, pa said, and Jessie brought him home to sponge off the old man."

"There's the end of the reel. Come on." And Belle and Arlie added themselves to the dark slope of heads. Over them the cone of light presently began to project an Indian scene. The piano emitted a brassy melody, and as a cowboy on his pony grew along a white strip of road a wooden "tlot-tlot" behind the screen increased its volume.

"Look at Amy Le Vitre," whispered Belle. "Is that the fellow she's going to marry."

Arlie glanced swiftly from the picture in Amy's direction. A heavy-jawed young man hung an arm negligently along the back of the self-conscious Amy's seat. "Guess so," she replied, returning her gaze to the demure oglings of the heroine school teacher on the screen, newly arrived in a very wild and galloping west.

"They say she keeps mooning about her old fellow still, but ma says she don't hesitate none about showing the diamond she got from this one," Belle continued.

"Yeh?" The school teacher, wandering after flowers,

was being stalked by Indians, whose fiendishly feathered heads were dodging behind thickets and boulders.

"Ma says Horace Nolte's going broke. Yet there he's got his wife and whole family here. Wouldn't you think he'd have more sense than that? Six of 'em, that's sixty cents."

Arlie shook an impatient head, and for an interval Belle interested herself in the picture. Down in the front rows small boys rose in active silhouette against a pastoral moment. Then caps darted like black bats across the screen.

"There's Jake and Ned back there, I think," Belle leaned to confide.

"What do I care? Watch the picture, can't you?"

"You don't need to be so persnickety." Belle dropped into sullen contemplation with hardly a glance at Arlie, who leaning forward tensely, her mouth a-twitch, enwrapt herself in the issues of the developing fight. Again from behind the screen came the wooden clatter as the cow-boys careered down the dusty road; the piano thrummed the vibrant minor of all screen conflicts; the Indians struck teepees and broke camp. Too late . . . the battle was on. . . . Puffs of white smoke, scurrying of squaws. And from behind the screen came poundings on the floor, groans, ki-yi's, war-whoops, mortal wailings. The school teacher, rescued from an Indian brave, was borne embracedly away; the smoke cleared, disclosing the twisted remains, the sorrowing squaws. And still the sounds of battle came from behind the screen in undiminished volume, and the caps again thickened across the light.

"O Arlie," Belle exclaimed, "ain't that killing?"

But Arlie did not answer; instead she only dabbed at her eyes with a wedged handkerchief. "I thought," she finally said—"I was afraid she wasn't going to get him."

She had observed nothing but the play; and its worn old piece of love and obstacle, ground tritely out, had played a tune that for her was immune to circumstance.

"O kid, cry about that!"

"Let's go," said Arlie. "I don't want to see no comedies."

Belle, wanting to stay, was touched to action by Arlie's decisive rise.

Outside the door they stood for a moment in the amphitheatre of light, dazedly conscious only of a string of men along the curb. Briefly Arlie made out the blond face of Ned Rickenberg. She seized Belle's arm and taking the outside piloted her down the walk with never a glance at the men. But as they went, voices spoke:

"Hey Ned, what's the matter with your little friend? I thought you was sort of home-like around them parts."

"Aw, forget it. That little tot! I'm not robbing the cradle."

Out of the glare they turned the corner from Main Street, and starlight fell suddenly upon them. Low in the distance rode the pale moon.

"Did you hear that, Arlie?"

"I heard all right. And just wait till Ned Rickenberg asks me somewhere again."

"I guess Jake was with him, too," Belle admitted.

"Course he was. Didn't you hear him laugh?"

"Did he laugh, Arlie? Honest did he?"

"Couldn't you *hear* him laugh . . . and what he said?"

"Jake! Jake didn't say nothing."

"He did too. He said, 'Me neither—no more cradles in mine!'"

"Honest did he, Arlie? I didn't hear nothing. Cross-your-heart kiss-up-to-God he did?"

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"That ain't swearing to it."

"But Belle, I *couldn't* swear to it. 'Cause I'm not *sure*

it was him. It *mighta* been some one else. Only he was standing right next to Ned, and *some* one said that and it sounded like Jake."

"Well, if it was I'd like to see him come around me again."

"Oh, you'd let him fast enough."

"Why, Arlie Gelston, I would not. What do you think I am, anyway? Who're the McCaffreys, I'd like to know."

"Yes, you would."

They were nearing Belle's house now. A light shone through the window on the porch, and in the yard a sprinkler played its moonlight crystal over the lawn. They talked an hour on the steps before Arlie roused herself to the lonely moonlight and walked in a dream home.

CHAPTER III

THE FOURTH

I

THE morning of the Fourth broke into the clear blue of an unrelievedly hot day, with a heat incessantly cracked apart by sporadic small explosions. Its advent in the Gelston household was unheralded by any uproar, for Phil, from whom alone it might have been expected, had risen early to go to his work in a stand; Mrs. Gelston, pressed into service with the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid—occasionally she went to church—feeling that Mrs. Jardine would not be satisfied unless she appeared by eight, had trotted off fussily at twenty minutes to nine. Arlie, alone in the house, put on her best dress with nervous fingers; and as the blare of a cornet rode the day's discordance, her stomach became a weak panicky void, her fingers seemed vacant and frozen. But with a final glance at the mirror and another prodding and patting of the bows on her oxfords, she ran downstairs just as Belle, in her orange-colored georgette, came along the sidewalk.

When they emerged on Main Street it was already aswarm with people, the whole vicinity harsh, screeching, explosive. Farmers' wives, many in black, some in white, trailed after starched children. Borne on parental arms, solemn babies sucked candy, or cried with stretched cheeks and shut eyes. The boys and young men wore

red and green banners about their hats or around their chests, that exclaimed in white letters: "Oh You Kid!" "I Love You Truly," etc., and with rainbow-colored feather dusters and gay cheap riding whips, they tickled polished necks and powdered noses.

The girls walked past the Bijou. Gran'pa Tritchler was megaphoning assurances that the parade would not start for a good hour, and that the Bijou was a good place to rest in the meantime. Arlie glanced up at a small window in the operator's room. A sleek, blond-haired man winked and waved at her.

"Is that fellow up there Somers?" she asked.

"I guess so. Was he a blond with his hair laying back? Then that's him."

At the next side street the parade was forming. They stopped. Z. T. Morse, abounce on a careering bay horse, his gray beard trimmed for the occasion and a red sash around his waist, was riding back and forth, marshalling the floats into line.

Belle clutched Arlie's arm. "Gee, kid! Look! There's Jake and Ned across the street."

Arlie glanced swiftly. "Well," she said, "don't let on you see 'em."

Belle pondered. "Where d'you suppose them girls is they had at the train? Hey, stay here. They're crossing the street."

"Not much. Ain't you got no sense?" And Arlie, striking off for herself, brought Belle after her.

In half an hour, with Ned and Jake irretrievably lost in the crowd, Arlie and Belle were awaiting the parade on the running-board of an automobile. "Here it comes," said Arlie, and there was a general pressure forward, with straining of necks.

Far down the street rose the zipping strains of fifes, and the electric rumble and bang of the drum. The slanted flag, its rich colors flickering in the hot bright

wind and a point of sunlight agleam on its golden eagle, swung to the center of the street. Behind it the fife and drum "corps" marched.

"They're coming; they're coming." Silence flew along the street as the parade rounded the distant corner. Behind the drum corps the parade took body.

"Look, Belle. Look at Isaac Pfannebecker blowing that fife." And Isaac, blue-coated and erect, only his gray flat head bent, was indeed blowing. By his side, topping him a head, marched Eli Brown; behind, with back swayed to support the drum, trudged Archie Chute, ecstatically flourishing his drumstick. But plainly it was Isaac who set the pace, and it was Isaac who, when *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* was finished, spirited them into *Marching through Georgia*. Feet on the sidewalk beat time, and all eyes followed Isaac. It was Isaac's day.

"That'll be about the last time we see all of *them* together," a woman in the automobile remarked.

Z. T. Morse charged up, megaphone in hand. "There will be speeches in the Park. The Honorable James P. Marvin of Council Bluffs is the speaker of the day. Everybody come!"

After an hiatus the floats rebegan the procession; a display of fire-arms by Z. T. Morse & Co; patriotically dressed children listening to the strains of a talking machine; the Goddess of Liberty and Uncle Sam, and then the decorated surreys and automobiles blazing with red, white and blue splendors, the wheels bright whirling rings.

The Marshal of the Day galloped back up the street on the other side. ". . . James P. Marvin, Speaker of the Day. Everybody . . ."

The crowd pressed thicker than ever about the stands, the barkers redoubled their efforts; warmish pink lemonade, guaranteed ice-cold, quenched unquenchable thirsts. Along the sidewalks small boys rang cowbells, and

dangled signs that announced dinners of Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist chickens.

"Belle, there's Ned again, and Jake. Sh—" The girls were standing by the stand in which Phil was working.

"O you kids!" said Ned, brandishing some gay feathers under Belle's nose while he looked at Arlie. Two bands, "Oh You Baby!" and "Kiss Me. Nothing Makes Me Sick," were wound about his straw hat, which was pulled well forward over his red plump face. Jake, dark and slim, with a pimply face, leered at Belle.

"Wha'cha been doing?" he asked.

"Oh, just bumming around," Belle answered. "Didn't old Ikey Pfannebecker enjoy himself in that parade though?"

"Gosh, I guess so—"

Then Arlie cut in, her face flushed and set. "Where's the lady friends who was going to spend the day with you?"

"Lady friends . . . ?" Ned looked foolishly at Jake. "We ain't got no lady friends, have we, Jake?"

"The ones you was seeing to the Flyer Saturday night. Come on, Belle, or we won't get no dinner."

Reluctantly Belle followed. "Gee whiz, Arlie," she protested, "you'll never have no fun that way."

"Wha'd'you know about that?" they heard Jake ask Ned.

"You wait, Belle," said Arlie, "I guess I know what I'm doing. And anyway, ain't you got no pride?"

2

The ball game was half over when Belle, seated on the grass, gave a shriek and fell over into Arlie's lap, leaving a monstrous wiggling spider where her head had been; slowly the spider followed her. Arlie looked up to the grinning face of Ned, noting Jake's sallow grin

over his shoulder. Caught off her guard she laughed answeringly.

"Ned, you throw that thing away," Belle commanded.

"Not till I throw a scare into Arlie with it."

"You can't do that now," said Arlie. "I know you're around."

"Then I guess I'll just *stick* around," he replied, seating himself at her side. Jake was already beside Belle. "Hey, kid, gimme four sacks of peanuts and four bottles of pop. Strawberry for one of 'em. What'll you have, Arlie?"

Later, when the game had served its purpose, Ned dared more personal themes.

"What made you so huffy this noon?"

"What do you suppose?"

"I don't know. Honest I don't. Wha'd I done?"

"You done plenty, Ned Rickenberg, and you know it." Discipline was relaxed, yet there were stings whose smart lingered.

"Tell me then, if I done so much."

"Not around here, I won't."

"Then come over by the grove—there's no one much around—and we'll get some ice cream. This game is too slow to keep *me* hanging around."

Ned carried two dishes of ice cream from a stand to a gray board table, at which they sat on fixed wooden benches. It was a moment of relief from light under the roof of shade, with the earth, worn to cool blackness, gratifying to sun-baked feet.

"Well, what was it?" Ned began.

"What you said the other night when me and Belle come out of the Bijou."

"What *I* said?—I never said nothing."

"Yes you did."

The crimson of his face increased its area; hastily he ate his ice cream. "Well, wha'd I say?"

"You said you wouldn't rob the cradle no more."

"Well, suppose I did?"—defiantly.

"You can't expect me to be so very agreeable, then, can you?" Arlie put down her spoon and her eyes held a brittle gleam.

"Aw now, look here, Arlie. I didn't mean what you think I did. Coming up from the depot you sailed right past, wouldn't say a word. I thought you was mad, and what about? How was I to know? Wha'd I done?"

Arlie reflected: He hadn't really done anything she could charge him with. Being on friendly terms with another and older girl, was after all no reason for not speaking. But—"Well?" she asked.

"Well . . . I thought if you was mad I'd give you something to be mad about."

"You sure did."

"Aw, come on now, Arlie. There ain't nothing in that to be mad about now. You ain't so young. Any one can see that."

Arlie dabbled her spoon in the remains of the ice cream.

"Why, you look just as old as the girl I was with Saturday night, and she's twenty-one."

"Do I?" Arlie took a spoonful.

"Why you sure do, only"—and Ned recalled newspaper jokes—"only you don't look old, really. That is, I mean—like an old maid or something."

"Come on," said Arlie, her dish cleaned. "Let's go back. We might lose Belle and Jake."

"Wait a minute, Arl. Say listen. How about the dance tonight? Suppose we go?"

"Nothing doing."

"Going with some one else?"

"N—no."

"Why won't you go with me, then?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Ma won't let me."

"She don't need to know. Tell her you're going to see the fireworks."

Arlie pondered. A great cheer went up from the crowd. Coon Falls was evidently evening the score. "All right," she said, "only I'll have to meet you down town."

"That's all right. I'll meet you by the First National Bank about seven-thirty."

With her arm in his firm grip they strolled back to the game for the last inning, Arlie dragging her feet with that assured reluctance which somehow seemed to be the gesture of those girls who all day had "belonged."

3

It was Arlie's first real dance. When the orchestra struck up she and Ned were among the first on the floor, closely followed by Belle and Jake. Arlie did not particularly notice Ned; he was there, puffing and grinning, not in the rôle of a definite personality, but rather as a justification of her own presence. Through him she was a member of adult dancing society; without him she would have been at home, or wandering the street and having her nose intermittently tickled. He was not a person, but some one to dance with. She danced.

Others danced. By dozens and scores they danced. Quickly the hall was stuffy, and collars drooping. It seemed to Arlie that half the town was there: Fannie McPhail, in a bright green dress, with Ray Jarvis, clerk at Horack's Grocery; Amy Le Vitre, clinging to her stocky lover; Tessie Nolte; Althea Holcomb, her red hair flashing under the lights; Sam Pettigrew also—his red hair answering Althea's from across the room as he

dipped and caromed from couple to couple, Angie Garfield tripping after him; and, of course, Belle, her fatish face already rosily pressed over Jake's shoulder. Ned pressed Arlie closer, but interposing her forearm she levered him away.

"Hot," he murmured.

"Awful," she returned, her eyes and mind on the crowd.

"Let's go get some pop after this dance."

"All right."

The third dance Arlie had with Jake, and then Ray Jarvis came up. "Well, Arlie," he said. "I didn't suppose you'd be going to dances already."

"Yes, and I didn't know you'd be going to 'em still, Gran'pa."

"Quit your kidding now, Arlie, and dance this next with me, will you?" Ray smiled foolishly.

"I guess so. If your rheumatism'll let you."

A few numbers later, when the dance had established its hot, public, characteristic odor of mingled sweat and perfume, Arlie and Ned came back for more pop. "Oh, Arlie," said Ned, suddenly, "I want you to meet my friend, Herb Shuman." Then mumbling, as an after-thought: "Mr. Shuman, Miss Gelston."

Arlie looked into the dark eyes of a tall youth of twenty-three or four, whose straight mouth was so thin as to leave almost no lip visible. His silk shirt was bright, but none of his clothes had that unused shininess that characterized Ned and Jake's efforts. And his eyes, gleaming affably, interested her.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Shuman," she said.

"Pleased to meet *you*," he responded, squeezing her hand. "How about this next dance? What are my chances for it?"

"Pretty good, I guess."

"Is it a waltz?" he asked, poising to catch the music.

"I guess so," said Arlie, marking time with her foot.
"Sure."

There was something different about Shuman's dancing, a smoothness, a confidence; and he was skillful in avoiding pockets and bumps. Ned took the latter good-naturedly, and many of them, with no particular regard for Arlie's comfort. And Ned, at best, could only shuffle in time. This was waltzing! At the end of the main dance Arlie added some vigorous spats to the applause, and was in Shuman's arms before the orchestra started the first encore to *Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland*. "Gee, they played that at my grandmother's funeral," Shuman murmured, but the sweetish, trembling strains moved in her veins like honey—there was such a thing as floating, floating secure in a strong grasp. She nestled closer to Shuman, the dancers became a blur of black and red, with yellow light from above poured over all . . . music. . . . She wondered if Shuman could feel the beating of her heart, she thought she could feel his. She looked up at his face, red, taut, dreamy, with a queer light in the eyes. He looked down and smiled. She leaned her head frankly on his shoulder—they danced—and plaintively the music throbbed and failed, dying into its last phase, with some one near humming the words: "There let my dree-eeee-eeams co-o-o-me tru-u-ue." A little self-consciously Arlie let Shuman take her arm and lead her to the pop-stand.

During the next intermission Ned came up importantly: "Say listen, Shuman's got his car here and says we should all go out in it up on the hill and watch the fireworks. Then we can take a ride over to Ft. Dawson, maybe, or come back here. What say? He's got a dandy car."

They found Shuman with the car drawn up at the entrance of the hall. "Jump in, folks," he called. "Meet

Miss Maneely, you bunch. Tell her your names while I crank."

In a moment they were moving along Main Street, awrithe now with colored tapes, the sidewalks dingily colored with confetti, and the street flecked with the light particles. The tumpty-tum of the merry-go-round dominated the confusion. They turned into a side street and the car chugged up the hill.

4

Shuman, at the wheel, engaged Miss Maneely in a low conversation. Her blown wisps of hair, when odd lights caught them, gleamed of gold, and then were dark against approaching headlights. She was twenty-two, Arlie decided, and of a pleasing slimness—not her own kind. Perhaps she might be like that, later. But there was an air about Miss Maneely that she enviously recognized as not hers. Perhaps it took that to get a man like Shuman. Far better the distinctness of Miss Maneely than the lack in Belle's face, lack of—Arlie couldn't tell what—something. She wasn't fully a person, somehow, as she sat there on Jake's lap. Arlie had secured the middle seat, and there had not been room for more than three. She was glad she wasn't sitting on Ned's lap. Shuman—

The car stopped. Two other cars were there and a number of buggies. Below, in the distance, ran a dull length of light, Main Street. Then, in the open space at the foot of the street, across from the station, a rocket climbed its golden peak, bursting to red, blue, and green stars. Others followed, with feathery trails of fading orange. Pinwheels spun dizzily in brilliant rounds.

"Oh!" cried Arlie, starting up. A rocket had burst in five stems, like the stamen of a lily, and poised in mid air . . . slowly falling. Then the air danced with golden

lines, crisscrossing. Weirdly, enormously, there came blooms of red and yellow fire, momentarily afame against the dulled blue of the sky.

"Old Z. T. sure spent a lotta money on them things," Jake ventured.

"Ain't they purty, though?" said Belle.

"Perty!" Arlie's voice rose scornfully. "*Perty!* I guess so!"

Another minute and the display ended with a set piece hardly distinguishable from the hill. Muffled applause rolled on the breeze. Beyond the station only a few radiant vestiges gleamed; even they vanished. Above, the dome of night, with its undimmed stars, persisted.

"All over," said Shuman. "Let's see if we can make the Ft. Dawson dance before they quit."

Buggies and a few cars were on the move ahead of them. The procession solidified. Dust made the road nebulous. The town was left suddenly behind and the cool of the fields touched their faces.

Belle relaxed against Jake. "Isn't this great, Arlie?"

"It sure is." Then to Shuman: "How long will it take us to make Ft. Dawson, Mr. Shuman?"

"Oh, I don't know—'bout forty minutes. But my name isn't Mr. Shuman. It's Herb."

The car took a corner, swinging Arlie against Ned. "Better stay here," he murmured, slipping an arm around her.

"Nothing doing," she replied, grasping the arm and placing it straight in front of its owner. The arm returned, only high along the back of the seat.

"Now don't go trying Sunday School stuff on me," he urged.

"Sunday School nothing!" she retorted. "When did you ever see me at Sunday School?"

"Last time I was there."

"When was that?"

"Five years ago." They laughed.

Miss Maneely turned around. "What's this talk about Sunday School?" she inquired.

"Oh, nothing. Arlie just remembered she'd forgotten the golden text."

"What's a golden text?" Shuman put in.

"Do unto others as you'd have 'em do to you' is one of 'em. Guess I know. Bright boy, I am." Jake spoke across Belle's tousled head.

"I been practicing *that* all right," Ned remarked, lowering his arm to contact with Arlie's shoulders. "Come on, now, Arlie"—in lower tones—"be a Christian."

They were off the main highway now, and skirting the edge of a dark road along the river. Suddenly Shuman ran the car to one side under the bowering shade, and bent forward to put out the lights. Belle was cuddled in Jake's lap, her head on his shoulder, her face subject to his repeated kisses, her ears to his low broken murmurs. Shuman threw an arm about Miss Maneely, and unprotestingly, as if it were merely time, she leaned toward him and her head disappeared beneath his shoulders. Ned grew restive, and his arm lay more heavily on her, then slipped to her waist. Arlie, large-eyed, sat looking across the opposite green cornfield, sibilant under a warm wind, to the rising blue of the night sky.

"Come on, kid," Ned breathed, "don't be lonesome." Then putting her arms around his neck, Arlie hugged herself close, and Ned's lips grew busy.

"Well, what d'you know about that?" said Jake, regaining consciousness of his surroundings.

"What?" Belle looked up.

"Why look at the little one. Just as comfortable as any one."

Miss Maneely raised her head: "What's up?" then, "Oh," and dropped back.

Arlie's eyes were closed. Ned's chest rose and fell

gently. She moved her head and he tucked it closer into his arm. "Cold, kid?" It was warm there, hot, and Ned's body, sweaty from the dance, smelled; yet somehow satisfactorily. Would it be different with Shuman, she wondered. Miss Maneely was lucky. Closeness was nice—but the rest—she was not so sure. Ned grew more demonstrative, circling her body with one arm and fumbling for her breast. She pushed his hand away, gently, partly because the gesture was new, uncalled for; partly, perhaps, because there was so little breast. Then, quickly, as if in contrition over the last denial, but with eyes still closed, she strained up and kissed the face bent over her.

Her eyes glimmered open. With a shock she saw Ned's yellow hair, his flat face. She had expected . . . No—it was silly. . . . Ned's kisses redoubled, and somewhere, at the side, in front, there was a commotion. The car jumped forward and she sat up.

Ned pulled her back against him, but for the rest of the time she rode with eyes open, though her body was relaxed against his.

"Guess we'd better not try to make Ft. Dawson tonight," Shuman called back. "I forgot I had to take Marvel back to Wenley yet."

So that was Miss Maneely's first name—Marvel Maneely—much prettier than the plain Arlie Gelston that was so harshly familiar.

The moon was obscured now and dimness misted all. Only the road was whitened by the flying wedge of light, the weeds at the roadside blurring. Back on the main highway they encountered the dusty run of homeseeking cars and carriages, the horses trotting smartly. The yellow flash of the occasional headlights was dazzling. Shuman leaned intently over the wheel, with Marvel throwing him now and then an indistinguishable remark. . . . It was even better than the dance.

Out of the flatness the foliage-filled mass of the town confronted them. Swinging down Main Street for a block they found it littered and deserted, except for men packing away goods in the stands by the light of flaring gasoline torches. In front of Horack's Grocery Store a farmer boy was lashing a horse cruelly. The lights of the Bijou were out.

5

Arlie slipped from the car with a hasty "Good night." The house was dark. Softly she turned the latch and tip-toed upstairs. Gaining her own room she closed the door with prolonged gentleness, and turned on the light.

But in half a minute soft pads sounded in the hallway, and the door opened to disclose Mrs. Gelston in her night-gown, her hair frowsily falling over her shoulders. She was blinking sleepily, menacingly, her face striving for authority, but her voice was only querulous. "Arlie Gelston, where you been all this night? I ain't slept a wink for worrying."

Arlie untied a shoe defiantly. "I been to the dance."

"Arlie, I told you you couldn't go to no dance. Not at your age. It ain't right, and I won't have it."

"You can't help it, ma. I been."

"Can't help it?" Mrs. Gelston advanced to the edge of the brown scarred 'bed. "You'll just see if I can help it. Who'd you go with?"

"Belle Ritchie."

"Oh now, you don't need to try to get out of it. Who'd you go with?" I asked."

"Well—Ned Rickenberg."

"Humph. Who's Belle with?"

"Jake McCaffrey. Rather have me with him?"

"No. Can't say I would." Yawning. "Not that there's much to choose. Who else was there?"

"Pretty much everybody."

"Well, who?"

"Well, let's see. Ray Jarvis—he danced with me once, 'n Amy Le Vitre, 'n—"

"Was Amy with that heavy-jawed fellow from Beaver? Ribble his name is."

"Ya. How d'you know?"

"I's hearing about 'em today. He's got four hundred acres over there. How that Amy Le Vitre got him is more'n I can tell. She ain't so much, s'far as I could ever see."

"Anyway, she was there, and Althea Holcomb and Sarah Eldredge— The catalogue grew as Arlie undressed. At last, her sleepy mind astir with whirling bits of gossip, Mrs. Gelston padded back to bed, though not without turning at the door to remark: "Well, I'll see about you tomorrow, young lady, when I can talk it over with your pa. You left the door unlocked for Phil, didn't you? 'Cause he ain't home yet."

In bed Arlie stared a long time at the indistinguishable ceiling and passed imperceptibly into a dream-ridden half sleep, wherein bits of melody flickered in her mind in a relentless iteration of sweet, thumpy tunes. She stirred. The lights of the dance hall glowed above her bed, and there were soft warmish pillows, with the bed blurring into the darkness. Then again she floated on with Shuman, down through a maze of laughing people in bright red waists. And whizzing along a country road, her head on Shuman's chest, she was kissed and kissed; but she could not return his kisses. Firecrackers popped on all sides, above them the sky was arched in gold. Then soft whirring darkness came upon them. She was kissing him and his hands were on her round full breasts. Out of a corner leered Ned's ruddy smiling face, with Jake's sickly grin cast over Ned's shoulder. . . . They should all go away—she told them to—and

leave her and Herb alone. They ought to be together because there was something—they shouldn't know, they couldn't understand—there was something she wanted to ask Herb. Something very special she was going to ask Herb. . . .

No—it wasn't right to ask him. He was a stranger, nobody in the family knew him. She would ask Ned when they danced together, and here came Ned, queerly tagged by Sam Pettigrew with his harsh red hair. "Ned," she was saying when blackness came—a long whizzing blackness out of which round yellow lights danced, those in front of automobiles. She couldn't ask Ned, he was too far away. She must ask somebody nearer—her father, who stood leaning against the door-jamb of the dance hall. "What's eating you?" he was saying. No! . . . horribly not her father. . . .

More clearly conscious of the bed, though with the back of her mind riotously agleam with lights and faces, she stared dully at the moon's silvering of the white paint along the window sill. The sill faded, cloudily the room grew dark.

Somewhere in the distance a firecracker exploded.

CHAPTER IV

MOVING HORIZON

I

MRS. GELSTON and Arlie were washing the last of the dinner dishes at half past five of a July afternoon. The temperature, good for corn, when combined with the blast of dry heat from the range in which a cob fire was dying out, made the kitchen bleak with heat. The dishes were finished, supper was prepared and eaten in an oppressive warmth of silence broken only by words as usual as the meal; and again the dishes confronted them.

"Now Arlie, you clear up," Mrs. Gelston announced, as if she were laying down a matured plan, "and I got to run over to Mrs. Lawrence's, and by the time you get 'em ready I'll be back to help you. It's too hot for one mortal to do 'em alone."

When she had gone Arlie rushed the washing of the dishes. She knew that it would be a good hour before her mother returned, and she wanted to be out of the house by then. That would avoid questions and some possible trouble, for at eight o'clock she was to meet Shuman near the cemetery.

It had been arranged one evening a week before, when Shuman had suddenly appeared in the drug store where she and Belle had been eating "happy thought" sundaes. He had wanted to take them out in his automobile then, with a friend called "Dolly"—short for Dolliver, it developed later—but Belle, through much giggling and

prodding of Arlie with her foot, had ultimately informed them that she must be home at nine or she'd "catch it." Arlie had not wanted, or though wanting, had not dared, to go alone. The later date had then been set, and though Shuman had gallantly promised to bring Dolly for her, Belle had refused. Silently Arlie had watched her squirm near and then giggle away from acceptance. So much giggling had hardly seemed decorous.

Afterwards she had drawn from Belle the promise of the yellow georgette waist, which she had smuggled into the house the night before. This, with a white picquet skirt, white lisle stockings, and black oxfords, completed the costume in which, her mother not having returned, she left the house for her walk toward the cemetery.

2

The cemetery lay between the railroad track and the river at the end of town opposite from the station, and across the river from the rundown section known as Old Town. There the town had first been established beside the dam, which was the only justification of the name Coon Falls. Later the coming of the railroad had shifted trade toward the station; the mill by the dam had ceased to grind, and Old Town retained little to boast except age. One store still kept up a bread and cheese existence, and two other false-front buildings beside it stood eyeless and vacant. Newcomers to Coon Falls called Old Town "the East Side," and only laborers dared to live there—laborers and "old man Wharton," whose great gaunt house sat far back on the hill above the gray shacks. It was a community joke that the only difference between Old Town and the cemetery was the side of the river. But the decay of Old Town—old on the prairies but young in the world—and the mellowness, and the freedom from surveillance, made the adolescent

and the couple greatly prefer it. No real objection could be brought to bear against it: neither part of the town had any particular history, only it was dimly felt that if anything disreputable should occur it would occur in Old Town. On Sunday afternoons the most respectable family groups wandered down there—a survival, perhaps, of that period of a decade before when a small steamboat had paddled over the nine navigable miles above the dam. Arlie could herself remember two or three trips on the “Rosalie,” whose old hulk lay now broken and rotting on the rocks below the lower bridge she was crossing.

A canoe, dark green on the darker, shrunken water, sent light ripples gleaming dully toward the banks. The girl in the canoe dabbled her hand in the water and spoke to the youth who was paddling. Both looked up at Arlie, who had loitered by the railing of the bridge. For a moment Arlie felt her loneliness. The faintly amused glance of the couple, who had a background and a little of the condescension that goes with backgrounds, stripped her of that companionable sense of the nearness of eight o'clock. Uncomfortably she left the bridge, yet paused with a vague defiance on the cemetery side—she was not to be driven away—to watch the dam, its thin roll, taut plunge and soft confusion of water. Then past the old graves she went to the farther corner of the cemetery, where were ranged the new graves with their smart, smooth, large stones. Beyond the near road ran the tracks, and along the road buggies rolled into town, a wagon jolted away into dust. Then toward Coon Falls came Shuman's automobile.

3

“All dolled up, eh?” Shuman called. Arlie did not answer. Her costume was effective, she felt, and she

was glad it had been noticed; she thought, too, as she climbed in, how much more effective it was than the changeable taffeta of the girl—or was she a woman?—in the back seat.

"That's Dolliver behind you, there," Shuman announced, "and his wife Pansy." Arlie half turned as the car started, to murmur, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Dolliver—"

"Ha ha! That's good—" Shuman cried back to them. "Mrs. Dolliver!"

Arlie flushed.

"Well, I thought you said 'Mrs.' "

"Nothing but a joke," he explained. "They're always together, see?"

Constrained, Arlie did not immediately enter the chatter of the other three. The car swung across the bridge. The couple in the canoe still loitered near, and as the car rumbled over the planks Arlie smiled at them superiorly.

4

This was only one of many similar rides, the first few of which were taken clandestinely. Elaborately Arlie sought to conceal from her mother her whereabouts, speaking of visits to the Bijou, walks with Belle; and for a time Mrs. Gelston remained unsuspecting.

Usually Dolliver and Pansy accompanied Shuman. Dolliver, stocky, white-faced, black-maned, she could not definitely continue to dislike, she found, nor like; and gradually she began to find good nature behind Pansy's convex, emaciated, over-rouged face. "Spanish-like" she called it to herself; and in the twilight admired her.

The times she loved were the times when Shuman came alone. Then she could loll back to watch his easy manipulation of the car. His taut body, quick hands and quicker eyes touched in her a vibrancy that lulled

her into forgetfulness of all but his face, cameo-clear against the flying blur of landscape. So sunk it was only with difficulty that she could rise through the serene depths of her contemplation to answer at intervals the banter he threw at her. Once, irritably, he asked her if she were tongue-tied, and thereafter she sought for "things to say," which were not hard to find; all he required was brief signs of attentiveness.

On the first night there had been a tremble of fear in her mind: half she feared and half she hoped for some nearness with him. She knew before they had gone many miles that Pansy was in Dolliver's arms, and they were murmuring. But the first two rides were destined to stay in her mind vacantly apart. With never a sign Herb had let her out of the car a block from home. But he had looked into her eyes, bending over and talking, unheard by the others, with an intensity in his eyes like the low tone of his pleasant voice. It was on the third ride, the last Mrs. Gelston was to be ignorant of, that the break came, suddenly.

They had been one evening near a little resort farther up the river, a sort of picnicking place that was a combination of dingy store, ice cream parlor, and boathouse. Dolliver and Pansy had gone to get ice cream and pop for all, but had been dilatory. Ten minutes Arlie and Shuman waited while the car chugged nervously and they talked.

"Aren't they ever coming?" Arlie had asked finally.

"We'll let *them* do a little waiting," Shuman answered, and shot the car ahead into the winding wood road that paralleled the river. As the low branches of the trees along this unfrequented road snapped down and back Arlie knew and knew by the sudden surge in her breast like the rush of the car itself that around these flying curves something waited. She held up an arm to ward off the leafy swoop of the branches, and laughed. Con-

fusion flowed past her and a dusky confusion mounted within her. A quarter of a mile they ran, Shuman said no word and Arlie did not look at him. A sharp swerve and they banked against a thicket of darkness, a blind alley with trees as gray pillars rising in the thrown light. Then Shuman kicked at the switch and the trees went out, dimness flowed over them, she was in his arms, bent over beneath his warm strength. Time stopped.

"Herb," she murmured. "Don't . . . I . . ."

"Don't what?" he whispered. "Think I'm going to stop? I can't keep away from you. I been wanting to hold you here for the last two months it seems like. Since that dance. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Well, I was sort of afraid of you. Afraid to start anything, I mean. You weren't like the rest."

("Not like the rest.")

"Listen, Arlie . . . I . . ." Time shot a moment forward.

"You . . . what, Herb?"

"I don't know . . . I . . . oh, kid!"

But in a few minutes she lay relaxed upon his arms, watching the stars among the leaves. Herb seemed content to hold her, and neither kiss her nor talk. Sibilance was in the trees. They were somehow enveloped in an unknown moving, nameless and unrecognized. Then by one impulse Arlie sat up and Herb got out to crank the car. Slowly they returned, to find Dolliver and Pansy waiting and voluble.

5

A few days later Mrs. Gelston returned to the house with lips set and eyes lit, not with maternal concern but with vindictiveness and an appetite for details Arlie could alone supply. Perhaps Arlie's refusal to glut her mother

with what she wanted was responsible as much as anything for the struggle that followed; for beyond dates, places, and people Arlie would not go, and these were but outlines. The ensuing days, spent mainly in the hot kitchen, were unrelieved by even a trip to the Bijou, for her mother had finally spoken to her father, and severity had followed. Arlie had overheard them talking, and her father had called Herb "a young pimp," adding: "What *he* needs is a damn' good horsewhipping, and I'll give it to him too if he don't watch out." Then he had come to the kitchen with brilliant eyes to tell her to stay in the house for the next week, and to mind her mother in everything she said. "If you don't," he had ended, "I'll see to you myself." What "seeing to" her might mean practically Arlie did not ponder. Behind her father's order had lain, as always, a threat, as if sometime, somewhere, that both had forgotten now, there had been between them an understanding and an intimacy. To that relation disobedience would be more than disobedience, it would be disloyalty. When he spoke at such times a sense of injury colored the anger in his tones . . . as if she had almost revealed the secret they had formed. Always when he was angry she felt frightened and, at the same time, closer to him.

Even this injunction would have been finally ignored, however, if Gelston had not been silent to moroseness for the next few days, coming home late for meals and leaving immediately after. But his condition served really to alleviate her own, for Mrs. Gelston began to talk of him. "Always queer like that. Why, I remember—" she would go on. And Arlie listened, pumping up an interest she could not feel in all the circles of her mother's reasoning. Occasionally she tried an appeal to her mother's own youth for precedent. To no avail.

Thursday had been the date set for the next ride. Wednesday as Arlie washed dishes—the greasy piles

seemed endless—she pleaded with her mother. Her father came home more glum than ever. Desperately, after supper, she washed dishes again, and worked at the kitchen until it shone with cleanliness for one of the few times in years. Even the dishes in the cupboard were piled evenly on clean newspapers. But in so hoping to win her mother she was hopelessly astray. Mrs. Gelston accepted the immaculateness as a gift due from a right-minded daughter. "Now you got it half way clean," she said, "see't you keep it clean."

It was late by that time and Arlie went up to bed.

Thursday evening she made one more attempt, but Mrs. Gelston set her mouth and went to a neighbor's, after weaving threats all about the house. Knowing that her mother would be gone for an hour of two Arlie felt like slipping out anyway, but remembered her father, whose mood persisted. Dry-eyed but with aching head she sat by her bedroom window, imagining that she saw the car stopping by the cemetery for a long wait, with Herb smoking cigarettes and Dolliver and Pansy getting impatient to be on to the dance at Blanchard. Would Herb get some one else? Whom? Belle . . . ? No, he wouldn't take Belle. Marvel Maneely? But Marvel lived in Wenley. It would be too late to get her.

A car had gone by. Her heart throbbed tumultuously. She rushed to the front room to look out the window; the car, with a couple in the back seat, was disappearing around the corner a block away. It had looked like Herb's. She waited straining to catch sight of it again, but was rewarded by only a blur across the narrow interval between two houses. Controlling a sob she clutched the curtain. The street that had run a thing alive with possibility relapsed to gray, and out of nearness the houses emerged and swept up, hard and near and stony in their gray color of sameness, solidly un-significant.

She went back to her own room to undress. Hours, it seemed to her, she lay in bed, dry and wooden. Her mother returned, moved about downstairs, came upstairs, and stopped outside her door. Arlie pretended to be asleep and breathed heavily, regularly. The door opened and her mother entered.

"Arlie, are you asleep? Mrs. Lawrence was saying . . . Arlie?" Mrs. Gelston hesitated, then tip-toed out, closed the door and went down stairs.

Arlie turned on her side—carefully—then cried into the pillow in long choked sobs that could not be heard outside the room.

The next day she went about her work in sharpened silence. For once her mother had little to say, but eyed her continually. Arlie wondered vaguely what was at work in her mind. At last Mrs. Gelston spoke:

"Arlie, Mrs. Lawrence was saying that Shuman's father was a retired farmer and owned about five sections of land. *She* sorta thought it would be all right to let you go with him. . . . Is that so?"

"Is that so?—that you ought to let me go with him? Of course it is."

"You know I don't mean that. I mean what I said. Has his dad got five sections of land?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ever hear him say?"

"No—think he's going around bragging the way *you* would?"

"You mind what you're saying. . . . Didn't you ever hear?"

"I know he's got more'n one farm. Herb was up to one near Cluver one time."

The work was easier that day, for Mrs. Gelston wanted Arlie to talk, and Arlie talked, seeing that she had erred before in withholding from her mother facts of such rich concern. Speculatively the extent of the

acres was dealt with, almost altogether by Mrs. Gelston, who pieced together what she had heard and what Arlie could recover from remarks of Herb and from allusions dropped by Dolliver. At last, Mrs. Gelston gave her consent for more rides, and on Saturday afternoon Arlie mailed to Herb a garish post card bearing the inscription: "Gee but this is a dead town!" below which she had written, "Let me explain about that date," and her initials. Two days later the answer came: "Driving back from Cluver tomorrow evening. Meet me 7:30 at old place." But his was a letter.

That was the last time they met at the cemetery. Thereafter Herb came to the house for her, and each time, as soon as the car stopped outside and Herb honked, Arlie, who had flown to touch her face with her new powder just once more, would hear her mother steal into the parlor. There, from behind the old lace curtains, she would peer at Shuman until Arlie went out and they drove away.

CHAPTER V

AUGUST

I

THE hot days of August in Iowa, which before had been to Arlie the unrelieved meaning of summer, came to be only a bright coin of penalty paid for the wide evenings when she and Herb and their companions trailed the dwindling light in the west, overtaken at last in the long roads of dusk by the night they fled and welcomed.

Evening and night. Steel of the day becomes mist. An unlit growth, new consciousness of body, mind a formless dusk, lips wordless instruments, volatile in new designs. After centuries an arm or a leg shifts. Its movement is continental and vast, having its own heavy melodic significance in a harmony of contact and withdrawal—and all within a world contracted to sky and field, or the clump of trees under which they waited, with time. Hands inquire of passive bodies. Cloyed mouths and wet strained lips. Eagerness sickening to weariness. Slump of frustration:

2

“Don’t!”

“Don’t what?”

“I’m tired of it. Take me home.”

“Tired of what? There’s nothing to be tired of.” ..

"Oh, isn't there!"

"Come here and I'll show you." His arm drew her over and across his lap. "Now, see." And he drew her closer, closer, his hands pressing on the slight flesh upon her ribs. Exhausted, she gave up, and drew his head down to the sick strain of more kisses.

"Tell me you're tired, do you? How about this? You don't act tired to me."

She relaxed to inertness. Blackness flowed within her and stagnated. Against the leaf-dappled sky his head bent in silhouette above her, his face just distinguishable.

A scream rose from the back seat and Pansy thrust her head over Herb's shoulder. "Let's be moving. This Dolliver bores me, and he's too fresh. I'm—"

"Shut up," grunted Dolliver from behind. A match crackled and its reflection flared in the windshield.

Arlie turned listlessly. "Sit down, Pansy. Dolliver's all right. Let us alone."

"What's the matter? Want to fight in peace?" Pansy's voice was high and flimsily metallic.

"Maybe. Anyway, what if we do? It's our business, ain't it, not yours?"

"Oh, sure, go ahead. Don't let me break up the family party." And she disappeared to the rumble of Dolliver's voice.

Arlie smiled up at Herb and began to finger his necktie.

"Let it alone," he protested, suddenly. "And sit up. You're too damn' heavy."

"Oh, am I!" Arlie sprang to her seat. "Get out and crank up. I told you I was tired of this."

"Yes, and so'm I." His feet thudded on the ground. "This free bus line I been running ain't what it's cracked up to be." He stopped to light a cigarette before climbing into the car.

"Free bus line, eh?"

"Yes, 'free bus line eh,' but this is its last trip!"

"Last trip is right," she said; "especially with you. You can ride back with Pansy. Dolly, climb over here and run this car home. Some one ought to run it once that *can* run it."

"You stick where you are, Dolly, if you know what's good for you. I think I'll run this old boat a little while yet."

Dolliver was climbing over the seat to take the wheel of the vibrating car. "Calm thyself, Herbie. A little rest from the s'vere nervous strain you been under'll be good for you. And Pansy ain't talked to you for a week. Besides I want to chat a bit with li'l' Arlie."

Herb started to protest, then jumped on the moving automobile to sink heavily beside Pansy. With her he kept up a conversation low with satirical tones, and Pansy shrieked her laughter as they sped down the road that flew toward them along its corn-bordered aisle. Once Arlie caught her own name, then that of Dolliver, to whom she turned at last in reply to his unheeded talk.

"You make the old car buzz, don't you?" she asked.

"I'm the kid all right. Herbie don't know how to get the speed out of her. Watch her take the gas."

At his words Arlie winced a little—for Herb; and again she heard Dolliver's name coupled with her own. "It's great to go like this," she confided, snuggling closer. Dolliver was big, his body hard, and his black hair was blown from his wedge of unhealthy white face. He wouldn't be so bad if you didn't remember the pimples. To avoid seeing them, even dimly, she moved closer. The talk in the back seat stopped.

She drew back. At no moment had she intended more, but Herb had let himself be manœuvred too easily. He should have wanted to ride back with her, should have been cold, insistent, even hard. Instead he had acquiesced. She hesitated.

"Oh, go ahead and be comfortable," Herb called.

Glancing behind she saw Herb's arm laid along the top of the seat above Pansy's shoulders. Then she put her head on Dolliver's arm. The gesture was frank, but she herself was in an ache of confusion, trying to lose herself in tolerance blurred by defiance.

"Just a little higher, little one. I can't steer that way."

She flinched back. It was not for Dolliver to choose. The blur mottled, vanished, and Dolliver stepped into harder perspective. "Oh, can't you! Can you steer *any* way?"

"I generally manage to keep her in the road. Ain't that enough?"

"If it's all you can do I suppose it is."

They were nearing the town now, which above the hard, even, black horizon sent upward its fringe of light. Arlie sat rigid, her face tense, dull vacancy in her breast. Back to Coon Falls, Coon Falls. . . . She was too near the morning when people would walk the streets and wagons clatter in and out of town. Bacon and eggs, oatmeal. The red light of dawn softening the colors of the town, hardening its brilliance, and at last welding it to a unity of green and brown and heat.

"Good night, kid." Dolliver had let her out in front of the house. "Sleep tight."

And as the car drew away, "Night, Arlie," Pansy called, with too much of good will for any of it to have been meant. The words rang on in a crescendo of sardonic echo as she realized, stupidly, that she had seen Herb's arm leave the back of the seat to encircle Pansy. A step and she shivered—with nervousness, with fatigue, because of the grainy vague ache in her back, the cramp in her legs. The pulse of motion persisted and was a muted tingle in her head and body. She stood on the porch, dim in the tarnished silver moonlight; then opening the door stealthily, she closed herself within the musty darkness of the house.

In her room she yawned as she unlaced a shoe, shook it off, and fell back on her bed, exhausted. Through the dark came the wedge of Dolliver's white face to impose itself above her disordered memories. She had endured him. . . . And Pansy's face, a long nose with a bluish bridge, routed Dolliver's face, to leer at her with sick pale eyes. . . . To strike Pansy! . . . to draw a cruel hand over and deep into her face, making those eyes droop with pain. . . .

Herb was gone with Pansy in the car that was shooting now along a level road she knew well, past Geiselhardt's farm, past Garlock's, past McRobert's—straight on down the dim road to Lawson, with Dolliver's hair combed by the straight wind; and in the back seat Herb holding Pansy close, chatting as he did chat, thinking thinly of her, or not thinking of her at all. Was it a "fight" they had had?

Her face, straining toward the discernible window, was almost uplifted to that place for light, where only the brownish-gray glimmer of the night was apparent. Her slim form in her disordered clothes was stretched cross-wise on the bed; the defeated remnants of daylight gathered slowly to overlay the pallor of her face with a low visibility; the face seemed to fix itself as something detached yet central, and its only meaning was the tired asking of a question no one could answer.

After minutes she moved and lay prone. With the toe of the shoe that was still on she began to scratch the stockinged other foot, and to run her toe along the wooden hardness of the shoe. It was rigidity versus give and pliancy. Incommensurable: each foot was wrong, wormlike softness and stone clumsiness. The ungainliness of having one shoe off and one shoe on! And that was the way she felt all over. . . . She started, kicked, sat up, laughed. But madly she unlaced the shoe.

Arlie had never consciously thought of herself as in love. Never had she spoken or whispered or thought the words, "I love" or "He loves." The accumulation had been too profound and too swift with a pale terror to permit a stay, or time or room for new explicitness. If any question had lifted itself into the clear above the thick of sensation it would have been, "Will he hold me tonight as he did last night?" and if any plan had been explicitly formed it would have been one to recapture by place and time and word, by preliminaries repeated as a ritual, some ecstatic gesture not of the knowledge but of the making of love . . . a wordless moment by the moon.

But the fact so clear to her the next morning, and growing insistent as the heat of the day soggily encompassed her, was the perception, as she peeled the potatoes, of the fact that she and Herb had indeed fought, absurd and unbelievable as that appeared when it was also clear that there had been nothing to fight about—that they had been close, close (and then it was the word came) and more than ever "in love" with each other.

Holding a potato above the water fully twenty seconds she looked through the wall at that thought, and at that new and personal use of the word "love."

"Stop your mooning," snapped her mother, coming into the kitchen.

"I ain't mooning," she returned, and plunged the potato into the murky water. All morning her thoughts ran far from her mother's domestic fret of housework and dregs of household chatter. Again and again she inquired into precise causes: Had it been Herb's desire for Pansy? But she herself had swiftly arranged the return trip; and realizing this she tried to loosen in herself a defiance that would refuse all future rides. Then she fell into a damning of Pansy, into cataloguing her

every defect of feature, form, voice, manner; and, without once glancing at the import of this, decided that it had been herself who had grown tired of Herb, so that she had tried to toss him away for Dolliver. Then she began to blame Dolliver for everything.

4

The heat of the summer relaxed its tension in the following days, giving play to cool even currents of air. In the pellucid morning Arlie woke in an exhilarating amnesia, recalling only the minor worries, the politics of meals and dishes. A plan whereby to ease the day's work formed in her mind as she lay staring through the window at the placid haze in the sky. As she dressed she sang, moved lightly, and felt her body as a strung bow to wing her through the day. She did not think of what had lately been. She found a release untouched by disorganizing memory, and in that release she had the benefit of contrast without its penalty; it was as if the opposed colors of her moods were heightening the present one—only the darker color and all its content were forgotten. Life fell about her as a light; in this she moved and was of it, glad of each present and subtle flavor of the moment. Mopping the kitchen floor she wrung the rags with even a joy of energy, wondering as she did so "what was in her" that she accomplished this messy work so painlessly: it slipped away behind her and vanished with such precision into the perfect result. All her life was fair and open, immune to all but happy possibility. She knew she was going to sing again, and looked at her mother out in the chicken yard, and heard her mother's voice but as another of the clackings and gutturals there, when, her mother turning, she saw the fret at work again on the achingly familiar face. Crashing through the high walls of her mood came Herb, Pansy,

Dolliver, and peace sank to lethargy. The mop was bedraggled and mousey, the mop water nauseous, the remainder of the work a dirty task.

But with the evening release came again when she wandered through the garden, tasting the coolness. Now it was a release into a distant sadness, a melancholy existing between pale stars and the warm earth. Earlier she had been sexless, and the glimpse of her mother had made her again a girl. The crickets sang their treble, and the shrill palpitation worked her on toward some subdued climax. A smell of the thick garden, the close smell of new milk from the barn across the pasture hung on the mild air. In the west the evening was colored with almost imperceptible coral above the submerging earth. It would be gone, and all this sad, new, strange quiet of happiness. All would be gone. . . .

Her mother was talking with her father in the kitchen. She must go in, and leave outside whatever had been there with her.

Tears came to her eyes. She must go in. . . . Yes, she was going, going to bed in sudden wretchedness, caught and held in the whirl of dissatisfaction, humbled and irritable with shapeless desire.

When Herb came the next night without foreword—as if he had rounded if not the same curves at least to the same destination as she—Arlie waited only until they had passed the last house in town before she threw herself upon him and cried, “O Herb, be quick!”

5

Hours later Herb's automobile was climbing a hill ten miles south of town. For the moment, as if they shared the labor of the car, the occupants were silent, but with the crest of the hill Pansy broke into chatter. Arlie was slouched in the opposite corner of the seat, her face taut

as she watched Herb in the front seat with Dolliver by his side. He was there as if she had sent him there, away from her.

"A crazy stunt I'd call it, you and me riding back here. Lots of fun, ain't it? My God!" Pansy said.

In answer Arlie sank lower.

"Lots of fun, huh! What kind of ideas you get in that head of yours, anyway?"

"Oh, be still," Arlie answered. "I want to think."

"Think! Good God! This ain't no time to think. You done some damn' poor thinking a while ago if it's bothering you so much now. Why, Herb'll walk right away from you if you treat him that way. He ain't got nothing to do now but take you home."

"Shut your face, Pansy, you make me sick." This time Arlie sat up. Pansy looked at her quizzically for a moment, then moved over to put an arm around her.

"Look here, kid," she murmured, "I'm not handing you any bull. I know how you feel. I just don't want you to throw Herb away. I—"

Arlie twitched free. "I know what I'm doing. Just let me alone." Pansy retreated.

The car hummed on under the late moonlight, which threw gray pallor on Arlie's face. Her lips were thinned with pressure, she felt deadness of weight and slack inertia in her legs and body, and looked dully at the familiar hands that were so strangely hers—a mystery of ownership that involved her whole body, which was so comprehendingly alive and yet static.

Further back in the night she had been different, wildly talkative and insistently near Herb, urging on him by her touch, knowing and not knowing, a quickness toward regions of bright formless desire. It had been confusedly precipitated in humiliation and unaccomplishing pain. Desire, forming, had blunted into words, into protest.

Relapse and breathing. Silence, low voices quickening nearer, movement, and they were in the car.

Pansy had stopped talking and the enormous shadows of the hills flew past.

She was home, sunk in the pit of black unknowing hours, whence she emerged slowly and forgetfully. The day was clouded for her with enormous shadows of the night, of the hills. Familiarities talked at her through the morning and afternoon but she did not hear; she was enclouded in memory of imperfection, of unaccomplishment. Then night darkened over her alone with him. In the silence beneath the trees they were with themselves, free, alone, complete—the stars dreaming closer, their pulsations cleared of pain.

6

A morning later, in her clumsy loose percale, she jammed through the housework, thankful only that her mother had not noticed how little she had eaten at breakfast. Food was a punishment, pulp to be taken and horribly swallowed. Her father had looked at her plate, then at her, but he had said nothing.

After dinner she stood by the window a moment, looking toward town. Shortly, thanks to the drudgery of the morning, she could go to her own room to nap, to think, to mull it over and over. Toward that all her conscious work had been directed, toward some muggy interval of freedom.

But as she listened to her father and mother she knew suddenly that she was not going to throw herself on her bed to think or to dream marvellous escapes from Coon Falls. She had thrown herself into routine, and routine had carried her across the crevasse of thought. She was even becoming interested in what her father was saying:

"So I told him he couldn't expect no treatment different from nobody else. 'I don't know why your box ain't come,' I said, 'and I can't do no more'n I am to find it.'"

"That's right. Don't take none of his lip, Oliver. Thinks he owns the town."

"Well, far as that goes he damn' near does."

"Was that old man Wharton, pa?"

"Yeh. Where's my hat?"

"Good-bye, pa," Arlie called after him.

"So long, Arlie. . . . Think I'm going to Chicago, do you?" he said from the front door before he slammed it shut. On the walk he turned to grin broadly at the vanishing smile she sent him. Turning back to kitchen realities she found the sick vacancy mounting in her breast again.

To overcome it she worked desperately at the dishes and went to her room. There she tried not even to glance at the bed, for it would mean an hour—hours—of wretched bodily fuss and alternate twist of mind and torpor. And just as energetically as she looked away from the furniture of her room did she try to look away from disturbing memories and forecast. Swiftly she must throw herself into something that would demand that she talk, not think. She spent the afternoon with Belle Ritchie discussing the approach of school.

When she came home her thoughts flitted from twig to twig of gossip and busied themselves with plans for her last year of high school and for clothes. Only at night after a visit to the Bijou, when she lay on her bed central in the hostile silence, did she realize how successfully she had withstood all that pressed upon her. For a moment more she was able to push back her thoughts, and to heed only the flecks and gnat-lines on the water-smooth surface of the silence. Then silence broke.

CHAPTER VI

GRENDEL

I

THE evening before school opened Arlie and Belle spent on the Gelston front steps, talking.

"Ma said I had to make my old serge do this year," Arlie said as they settled down. "But with those new collars and cuffs I guess it'll look all right, maybe . . ."

"Yes, sure it will. But you know, kid, I just *couldn't* wear mine again. Like a looking glass it was."

. . . "Belle, you been with Jake much lately?"

"Once or twice is all. But say, you sure made an awful hit with that Shuman. They say he's dead gone on you."

"Oh, I don't know"—with diffidence. "I *have* had a lot of fun this summer, though. More'n you have, I bet, even if you did go to the lakes."

"Yes, but you don't know what I did at the lakes." Belle's laugh implied dark secrets.

"Ye-es," Arlie responded. "I bet you didn't do nothing more'n go in swimming and ride the roller-coaster, and giggle every time a fellow winked at you. I guess I know you, Belle Ritchie."

Belle sobered to petulance. "Yes, and I guess you don't either. Just because I don't cut up the way you do around home is no sign. Besides, who was the little innocent the night of the Fourth?"

Arlie remained silent. It would have been so easy

to crush Belle completely, as the fear internally gnawing told her.

Yet for a moment even the fear was stilled in the superiority that flooded her while she let the adverse point be scored. And again was sick with dread.

"You needn't think," Belle went on, "that 'cause I don't get people talking about me that I don't have no good times."

"You say people talk about me?"

"Course they do. You can't run around with that Pansy Merkle without having people talk."

"What's the matter with her?"—faintly.

"Well, folks say she's tough, awful tough."

"They—they don't say *I'm* tough, do they?"

"N—no. Not yet, but I bet they do if you keep on with Pansy and that gang."

"I don't go with Pansy. I go with Herb. Anyway I did, though I ain't seen him lately."

"I thought you was with him night before last. You told me you was going."

"Well, I didn't." That had been only an excuse. She had had too much of Belle, and had longed to be by herself, to fight the grisly intangible battle, as if by much fighting she could advance against the invisible elements with which she was engaged. Awkward now—but it didn't matter. Little did, except one thing. "I guess," she suddenly spurted, "that all that's the matter with you is that you been left out of some high old times."

"I guess it is *not*," Belle rejoined. "I have times a lot better'n yours."

"Oh, do you!"

"Yes I do, and—" Belle rose.

"O kid, don't go, not yet." Arlie clutched at her. "I don't want to be alone. I mean not now, just before school starts. Let's not argue, kid. I didn't mean to

fight. I guess I was just sorta wanting a new serge, like yours. That's all. Come on and stay."

When Belle left at ten Arlie went up to bed immediately. It would be a great day—tomorrow. It would be just a month tomorrow, too, since her last period. But the infinitesimals of chatter had so accumulated in visible points of interest that she was really attached to hope again, and a bodily depression, an irritability, so worked in her, or she fancied they so worked, that hope might be surety at any moment. The thought so buoyed her that effortlessly she went upstairs, and then sank in an instant's torpor because she felt so good, but the torpor was itself a reassurance; and so the circle ranged until she went to sleep, her last thought being that she might waken to know, gloriously and in a new flame of purpose and life to know, that she was indubitably sick.

3

The morning sunlight promised a hot day. Wearing the refurbished serge was put off for a time—that was Arlie's first reflection as she opened her eyes to the silent brightness of her room. Then she remembered. Still, later she might know; it was too early. Noon marked the exact middle of the day. Anxiety could be put off until then. She gave herself to the preliminary nervous delight of the first morning of school, dressing with meticulous delicacy, as if an indefinite series of brushings, pats, and readjustments could somehow transform the very texture and cut of her clothes.

At school she received her books and assignments as mere things. Always in the back of her mind was building a huge significance about the high noon hour when all this would be over; but oddly, as the significance piled upon itself she forgot its context; it became an event,

a bright, meaningless, sun-filled climax. She fretted, impatient for noon to come, until that hour became only a mark to be passed on the road nowhither.

She chattered with her classmates, sometimes in twos, in threes, in whole groups. In class she jotted down assignments mechanically and emerged to mingle with the gayest as they flocked down the long, dark halls of the high school. Then they were all back in the assembly room with its scarred desks, bust of Longfellow, and a cast of Diana. The principal, Old Budlong, a tall blond with high forehead and small chin, was complimenting them on the excellent beginning they had made on what he hoped would be their last year in the old building. Then they were pushing and scrambling through the doors, out to the diverging streets and separate houses. In the push and thrust of the exit and in the noisy gabble on the way home Arlie had so completely immersed herself that it was not until she had left the last group for the last lonely block that she realized noon had passed.

4

She flung herself into the house and sank down on a dining-room chair.

"I'm not going back to school, ma," she announced.

"Oh, aren't you!" Her mother appeared in the kitchen doorway with a tea-towel and dish in hand. "Now you can just get that notion plumb out of your head and help me with these dishes. Phil'll be along right away and dead hungry too."

"I'll help all you want, but ma, I'm not going back. I'm sick of it. What good's it do me?"

"Shut your face. You're going back and you know you are. What would your pa say?"

Phil burst in. "Dinner ready? Come on, now, let's have a little speed. I got to get right back."

"You don't have to get back no more'n I do," Arlie offered.

"Oh, don't I!"

"Well, why do you? Your school don't start before anybody else's."

"Oh hell, shut up! You make me sick. Any one'd think you *run* the school."

"I could run it a lot better'n you, at any rate. If you're in such a hurry grab that dish towel and help out a bit."

"Now Arlie," Mrs. Gelston cut in, "you stop jawing Phil and tend to business. You'd jaw the life out of anybody. What's Phil done to make you jump on him so?"

"Nothing. He never does. That's it."

"Ya—what if I don't? I guess anyway I don't go on a lot of joy-rides with a bunch of toughs like Shuman and his gang."

"They're not tough. They're—"

"Aw, get out. Think I's hatched yesterday? Ain't a fellow in town don't know what that Pansy Merkle is. And I'll bet you'll be damn' near as tough as she is, if the hot weather lasts."

As Phil spoke these last words Arlie's face grew hard and sullen. She stopped wiping a plate to step forward.

"Now just stop that, Phil, and Arlie too. It's no way to act, the first day of school." But Arlie did not hear her mother. With an awkward overhead sweep of her left hand she had thrown the plate crashing against the wall where Phil's head had been, and had run, choking, to her room.

"My God, ma," Phil said, straightening from his crouching position, "wha'd'you know about that!"

"Arlie!" his mother called. "Arlie!"

"Gee, if that'd ever hit me it'd cut my head open or an eye out." Then anger rose above the swift bewilderment.

"My God, ma, look! Why the damn' little fool mighta killed me! Honest, look! That dish is in fifty pieces." Speculatively he eyed one of the pieces, as if calculating by a minute inspection of a fragment the injury the whole plate might have inflicted.

Mrs. Gelston was going through the dining-room on her way upstairs, untying her apron as she went. "I'll just see about this myself," she was muttering. Phil continued on a kitchen chair, contemplatively fitting one piece to another, his brown hair falling forward to accentuate by duplication the gibbous curve of his nose.

5

Despite the many trips of her mother to the locked bedroom door, the tattoo of talk without and silence within—except for an occasional creak from the bed-springs—Arlie held to her determination not to return to school until it was indeed too late.

At length Oliver came home and his wife mechanically set forth the cold remains of dinner, while he listened to her until his silence became morose. Without having uttered a word he slouched away.

Whereupon Arlie appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Has pa gone?" she asked.

"You heard him, didn't you?" her mother asked. "Why didn't you come down? What's the matter with you anyway? Why, you pretty near killed Phil. If that plate had hit him it mighta split his head or put out an eye. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't know. I don't want to talk, ma. Is there anything left to eat?"

"I'd think you wouldn't want to talk! But suppose you just sweep up that china and put it in the barrel. Then we can see about eating."

Returning from the barrel with an empty dust pan

Arlie remarked quietly: "I'm sorry I done it, ma. I don't know what got into me." She sat down by the confusion of the kitchen table, resting her face in her hands and staring with tired eyes at the greasy, small chaos ahead of her.

"I'd think you didn't know what got into you," her mother went on. "All Phil was trying to do was tell you the truth about your own goings-on. Just what I been going to tell you myself, only I hadn't got around to it. You been with that Shuman gang too much, do you hear? And you ain't going to be with 'em no more. I guess *I* know when it's time to stop, even if you don't."

Arlie turned to look at the yellow flesh and nervous lines of her mother's face. There was no anger in Arlie's expression now, only a pained acceptance, the passivity that follows tears. But her eyes were brilliant, and the muscles in her thin white arms showed in taut relief. "You never said nothing, ma, after that first time, when you found how much money he had."

"I guess his money don't make no difference with me. I'm looking for other things than money, I can tell you, and you better be, too—staying away from school like this!"

"I can't stand it to go back, ma. Besides, you see, I ain't well."

Mrs. Gelston turned around. "Oh, so that's it! Well, I was wondering. Huh! It never took you *that* way before."

Arlie rose to her feet with an exaggerated unsteadiness. "I guess I'll go up and lie down a bit."

"Humph. It's sort of convenient for you, if I do say it."

In the doorway Arlie turned. "I'll—I'll work if you say so. I'm sorry I been so mean." And for two hours she worked, saying no more than she had to; and released at last went to her own room. There she sat by

her window inert, seeing across the green-filled distance the students on their way home.

If only she could go home as they, with no burdens but chores and lessons, and no lying required to ease the hardening of a disastrous future, which she could hardly face in prospect without the thought of actually living it inch by inch and hour by hour, through a gray accumulation of aching days. Momentarily the months swept dizzyingly around her, an abyss of time.

She was only a shell of herself with fragile arms in which no strength lived. Where would she find the energy even to lift a chair, to shove it? How was it she had been able to sweep up the china, to wash and wipe the dishes, to put them away, to sweep the dining-room and kitchen, and finish the ironing her mother had left? Never again could she do that. How could she? Her chest emptied, her breathing stopped—infinite lassitude in which there was no moving, nothing but heaviness and a leering round of hostile faces, hostile as silence . . . wagging tongues, from which she could run nowhere. She threw herself on the bed, seeking the cleansing relief of tears, but no tears came.

It was a dismal supper that she ate; and she dragged through the after-supper work forcing each movement, letting plates slip that she could not hold; and at each slip she started in memory and fear of more outbursts. It seemed an ironic good fortune that she broke nothing.

6

"I guess you'd better go back to school, girl," her father had said next morning at breakfast.

"All right, pa," she replied docilely, but without raising her eyes to his, "I'll go—today, anyhow."

"Yeh, you go today. Then we'll see, maybe. Think it over, sort of."

As she walked to school, avoiding the streets on which she might meet Belle, she slowly dragged and pushed herself into a conviction that her condition was mere delay, pure irregularity, and nothing else. Maurine Le Vitre had once gone three months, it was reported. Irregularity—of course! She almost skipped along the walk, and entered the ephemeral conspiracies with such enthusiasm that twice she was "bawled out."

At noon she started an impromptu dance—a forbidden thing—and before the dance was checked had worked herself into such a heat of bewilderment that when she flopped into her seat at assembly, brushing the damp hair from her forehead and flashing at Arnold Tieje, whose arms she had just left, glances quick with the hot afterglow of their intimacy, she could hardly find poise or stay in the hot dance of her mind. To take her books and march sedately to English VII was a joke, a strange punishment, even a reward, or nothing at all—except forty-five minutes of listening to questions about Woden and Thunor (what were they, animals?) and watching clouds ride above the green fringe of trees along the window sill, and hearing infrequent rumblings from the street.

Miss Haggerty, the new teacher of English, was making weird marks on the board, and a titter succeeded the silence with which the first marks had been greeted:

'**þ**y he **þ**one feond ofercwom,
gehnægde helle gast."

Below these she wrote:

"Therefore he overcame the fiend,
Subdued the ghost of hell."

"Oh hell!" murmured Arnold Tieje. Difficultly Ar-

lie controlled herself and looked around at the rest of the class. A ripple of giggling widened. Miss Haggerty turned, blushing. The class sobered to a look of painful innocence.

"If you can control yourselves," Miss Haggerty said, "we'll go on with the lesson. If not, we'll let Arnold, and any one else who needs it, time to become acquainted with such unfamiliar words as 'hell.' I'm sure it must be new to you, Arnold, or it wouldn't disturb you so."

The stir throughout the class confirmed the squelching of Arnold, and a propitiatory air of interest was assumed. The hour passed, and Arlie pushed out to a study period with the sinewy rhythm of the lines strong in echo in her ears:

"Therefore he overcame the fiend,
Subdued the ghost of hell."

She gave them no setting beyond their own gray suggestive aura, and the tags of her attention played with the clouded day and grim waters that Miss Haggerty's few words had somehow made visible before her. "Bay wolf." Queer name. She turned to her text: Beowulf. A pause in the day's hilarity, given to that name, and to Grendel's—a crunching name. No sunshine in those days. But the textbook's short account left her cheated, her hunger for the malignant details unstilled. When the book was closed the vast fight ground on above her, and in waters sinking to far green slimy levels from her feet—all hazed by remoteness, clear only as a suddenly remembered, troubling dream.

That night, after a long period of work, for she had been extraordinarily willing to accommodate, she pounded her body viciously, in torment, and choked herself into a sleep wherein Beowulf and Grendel again fought monstrously in a green writhen pallor of upper air, tearing her as they tore themselves.

Late in starting for school the next day she loitered along an empty street where only the sunshine was busy among the tangled and fallen gardens. The school bell rang distantly, and seemed not only remote but of another realm, in which immature people went about seeking ends she could not understand. A lush rank thicket, springing up overnight, had shut her outside of a closed circle of aimless fun and absurd studies. When the bell stopped ringing she knew that she was not going to school.

After a time she found the railroad track, walked the rail, wandered on. There was a straightness about the track, a steadiness; it went somewhere, to other places than Coon Falls, yet like Coon Falls. But it didn't change things, it just moved them. *She* changed things, or things changed her. She wasn't going just somewhere. *There* would be different; how different she couldn't tell. But it was impossible to stay in school; she'd leave home first. Get a job—she was old enough. She could take care of herself.

The tracks gleamed onward around a steep bank of clay, raw yellow in the sunlight. On top of the bank rose a clump of trees. Scrambling with sinking feet up the crumbling clay bank she lay down in the open light, and the spotted shade flowed and vacillated on her checkered dress. Sunlight warmed her, and she felt lulled with a new inrush of vigor. She was strong with the white rush of clouds across a full sky, and a wind blowing. A train whistled and clamored past, the earth beneath her throbbing with confusion. . . . Moment of strength and peace, with life beyond mere vigor lying invisible around the corners.

On her return, a little before noon, she passed the Bijou. As she did so she recalled that Gran'pa Tritchler's daughter, Mrs. Somers, had been taken to Des

Moines for an operation the week before. Somers himself, with rolled-up shirt sleeves and straw hat set far back on his shiny "lay-back" of hair, was putting a banner in the lobby frames. Arlie did not know Somers, who had been in town only a few months, but she had known his wife, Jessie Tritchler, who had been a Senior in high school when she had been a Freshman.

"Oh, Mr. Somers,"—she turned impulsively—"say, how's Jessie now? I heard she was pretty bad off."

"Well . . ." Somers settled his hat more firmly on his head. "She ain't none too well, that's a fact. I'll have to go back this afternoon, I guess. The doctors said when I left she'd pull through all right, but I got a telegram this morning calling me back."

"Well . . . I just hope she *does* pull through all right, and you tell her I said so. I'm awfully sorry."

"I'll tell her all right, but—" Here Somer's face broke to a grin that displayed what impressed Arlie as very handsome and regular teeth. "But who'll I tell her said so? I'm not sure I got you placed. I see so many, you know."

"I? Oh, I'm Arlie Gelston. She'll remember me."

Somers tipped his hat. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Gelston. I seen you before and wondered who you were, but I never heard your name." This while he shook hands with her for as long as he spoke.

"I'm pleased to meet *you*, Mr. Somers. And you tell Jessie what I said, won't you?" She dropped his hand, which she had shaken with a valiance lost in his big warm grasp, and backed away, stumbling a little, and then walking quickly to pass off her confusion.

Their meeting had been more protracted than she had intended when she first spoke, yet except for the stumble it had come off rather well. Had she been too positive that Jessie would remember her? She was not so sure.

Still . . . Jessie used to speak pleasantly when she sold tickets, and she had gone to the Bijou often enough.

And then through the noon hour she twisted and turned and stretched the idea she had found. It might be her chance . . . a job. How such a job could alter conditions she did not consider.

The train that Somers would probably take left at two-thirty in the afternoon. He would be much easier, much nicer, to deal with than Gran'pa Tritchler.

At one-thirty she stood at the back of the ticket booth watching Tritchler shift his small blue eyes in their lank sockets as his gaze drooled over her from head to foot. All the while he chewed tobacco, and his bent form seemed larger in the half light in which he stood.

"I guess she'll do," he answered Somers, and rolled his quid into the other cheek. "We got to have somebody if I run the machine, that's sure. . . . Won't pay more'n fifty cents a night." He shuffled away, mumbling.

Somers began to explain her duties in detail; and then was talking, she found as she recovered from a relapse into a dizzy moment, about the moving picture business: "It ain't now what it might be or what it's going to be. It's going to grow. We're going to see an even bigger movement in it. It's bound to grow. People have been getting the habit in the past few years; children have been growing up with it. Now we can begin to cash in on it. . . . Huh? Yes, be around by seven or a little before. He's likely to be touchy tonight. Always worries him to operate. Can't change reels fast enough, and won't have two machines. Then they get restless and he goes to pieces, balls things up right."

On the way home she tried to plan some manipulation of Phil that would postpone his inevitable report of her absence from school, though he might not notice it for a day or two. Even two or three days would let her so establish herself that it would be harder for her parents

to insist on her quitting . . . if the job should hold beyond that time.

8

She had formed a habit which she did not recognize, though its use was constant. Walks were planned, kitchen work assailed, energetic gossipings with her mother pushed on and on to the last wisp of trivial interest—all to withhold her mind from a terrified contemplation of herself and her baby. The stratagem might work for ten minutes, half an hour, only to be followed, especially when she was alone, by a complete reversal in which she was hurled headlong to the lowest depth of her misery, and the blackness of the future poured over her.

Getting the job had been only a more carefully planned unit of this half unconscious strategy, but one that was about to fail, since she found herself going to the Bijou that night with disheartened steps.

Ordinarily Tritchler himself took the tickets which Jessie Somers sold, but tonight he had installed a little pale-faced niece who was to "get to see the show all I want" she told Arlie, for her work that week. Arlie was glad she was not to be paid in that way. She needed money. Perhaps Somers had helped. . . . She rather liked Somers. It was too bad his wife was sick.

For the first hour she was kept busy with her change and tickets; shortly the figures began to set themselves in her mind, and the making of change tended to become automatic. Toward nine o'clock the people came more infrequently, and she had opportunity to count the money that filled the cash box, taking pride in the amount as if she were somehow responsible for it.

Then she was free to realize her new vantage point. The tawdry front of the Bijou, the bronze-colored marquée, and the great pale coppery light buzzing continuously she knew already from her many visits but it was

not in just this way, through plate glass, that she had known the "Home Bakery" in its white false-front building, with dim white curtains across its lower windows, and the Globe Furniture Store's permanent display of mission furniture.

The people began to leave, but she did not watch them, and hardly replied to the high school girls who stopped to question her. Soon all the crowd had gone and Gran'pa Tritchler, after putting out the house lights, had come for the money. She was free at last to start home, and went a block with Gran'pa's niece, Debbie Kittifer, who chattered palely of her teacher until they parted.

It was a windless, moonless night with only a few patterns of the stars visible, a night in itself of vague, cool depression that stole keenly into her as she speculated on what she should tell her mother. The truth would probably be best; she could say she was going to school, too, if only Phil wouldn't give her away.

Her account passed off with only a little perfunctory questioning that was easily put aside: her work wasn't hard, and she could study in the booth after eight; and it would mean three dollars a week, or twelve a month, if it lasted.

Dullness . . . not heavy but irremediable, possessed her as she undressed, dullness without even a rift of pain. Even her suffering seemed to be dying, to leave . . . days upon days, an enormous tick-tock of day and night, day and night, until—

She sat upright in bed, sprang to the window, paced wildly. She had not thought really of the baby itself, but only of the blank disgrace, people talking. . . . She would have to care for it, pick it up, nurse it, change it, rock it off to sleep. She, who couldn't find energy to live—couldn't, at least, when she thought of it or tried to live through her work in advance, knowing how all the time her mind would be twisting the harsh possibilities.

The baby. . . . "Oh, my God, my God!"—The cry she instantly tried to change to prayer, trying to shut out the fact that she had sworn when if ever she needed the help of God, and a faint whisper echoed away as she knelt that God could not be so cheated, and this even as she started her prayer, "O my God, my God—help me, and take this—don't let it—" She choked. The echo rebounded: she couldn't cheat God that way; she had sworn, and she might, later on, need His help even more. Better wait to pray. She must fight it out herself this time.

And why, of all things to do, had she placed herself in the most conspicuous place in town, where everybody would be coming? Was she a complete idiot? Couldn't she think at all? Yet the counter might hide her. . . . How far up had it come?

Again she struck at her body, flailed it with her arms, hammered with her fists—the body that was bearing her on, despite herself, like a car whose steering wheel is broken and can't be stopped—carrying her, chained inexorably to it, off the road into miserable places, out from a precipice. . . .

And her job wouldn't take her away from Coon Falls. Why had she wanted it? It would all be here, here. . . . Not God lived above, but something greater than God: a shapeless Grendel, grayly infinite, that willed blindly, deaf to all appeal, which even God could not persuade because He could not find, though it was poisonous everywhere, and she its latest victim. She was sobbing on her knees beside the bed, choking her sobs back to a wrench of silence, till only an occasional quiver disturbed the folds of her muslin nightgown.

CHAPTER VII

CAUSE AND EFFECT

I

A HOPE that she was not pregnant had worn itself out when Friday came, and by degrees she was inuring herself to fear; then the iciness of this began palpably to go, leaving a featureless chill in which she moved forgetfully, recognizing dully a new medium in which she was henceforth to live, and to which it was well fully to accustom herself. Meekly, futilely, she tried to part the days ahead of her, to see the darkest face that time might hold, and often that face was so black, beyond all possible reality, that she recoiled convulsively to the moment in which she lived, neglecting all the intermediate stuffs out of which her life must inevitably be shaped.

Often during that week she found herself on the bank of the railroad, where she had gone on her first day of truancy.

In the hollow of the rise she would lie among the golden-rod, rising in stately delicacy around her; heavily her mind would drift among such items as she could clearly see. Then, in stabbing protests of fear, she would grip her body, good yet treacherous, that was floating her so irretrievably away from all that she had known and all that she had endured. She wanted to clutch the whole of her past to her, and to grasp at it even with hands that must slip off.

Herb she had seen only through a vision wavering

with pain that distorted his face and placed him at inaccessible distance. More unreal than ever did he seem on Friday morning as she lay in bed, when there came an inexplicable clearing of her mood, and a steadyng of her vision, that let her see Herb as he really had been, and was! Herb, the father of her child, Herb—her husband? Weights slipped away, weights that must have been physical, so light did she feel as she suddenly sat up in bed and laughed, "My husband!" Of course he would marry her; that was always done, or almost always. La Vona Romkey's sister had married that way. The whole town knew it, though people didn't particularly let on; and her baby had been born only four months after they were married. If Herb could arrange it quickly, her—their—child could be born only a week or two early, and that might be only natural, an accident.

Just because she was the one who did all the dirty work was no sign that she couldn't be helped by any one —by Herb, who loved her. Did he love her? Of course. . . . Yet it *had* been a sign, all the miserable while. Because she did the work Herb had been completely out of it. She hadn't once thought of marrying him. But now, all that she had to do was tell him . . . to tell him.

In this onrush she totally accepted her pregnancy, with no reservation of hope that her condition was mere irregularity. After that she never hoped again; there was regret, but seldom the regret that mottles dreamfully into a contradiction of reality.

Breakfast over, she went at once to the Bijou to write her first letter to Herb. She did not care to trust the most flavorless message to a post card.

2

Her job at the Bijou now included sweeping and cleaning and dusting, work which she had obtained from

Somers on his return and over Tritchler's objections. For this she was to receive fifty cents more a day, six dollars a week. That, Arlie had thought, would soften the shock of her having left school; she hoped that it would let her off with only a slight jar as the fact collided with her mother's authority, for the sum was not too small a fraction of her father's salary.

This morning it was very convenient to have a retreat where she might be undisturbed as she thought out and wrote her letter:

"Dear Herb,

"I have been wondering why you havent been around since that last ride we took for I have been wanting to see you very much. I have something to tell you that I don't want to write, it's too important. Call me up and let me know when you will come. I'm working now at the Bijou at night and have quit school, so don't come at night unless it's Sunday, when I can go if you come. Or I *could* go late at night after the show's over if you can't come Sunday, only I could not go for long then.

"But let me know and come soon. *It's very important.*

"Lots of love,

"ARLIE GELSTON."

She had questioned the close for some time, wondering if it might be considered "too fresh"; then she had thought: "Well, he's going to be my husband, and I ought to love him, even if I don't. But I do." With that, she sealed the letter.

"It's just a matter of days now," she told herself on her return from the post office, and so decided to tell her parents that evening of her quitting school. Telling them herself might help. Certainly it would be better than letting them discover it by accident, and by accident which might fatally distort the story she was building, partly of fact, and which, if only they would take

it as she planned to offer it, would permit the event to pass off without collision.

All morning she worked in the great empty room of the theatre; the very emptiness ministered to her in so far as it was a shelter that she possessed alone, that was hers, the one place other than her bedroom that partook of her as she of it, for little by little, as she made the rounds of the seats, the room did take on a vague flavor, a smell, of ownership. At noon she walked home through the rain almost happy, and her happiness was more precious and quietly held because on every side it sank toward danger.

3

Telling her parents, she found that night, was not at all the deft manipulation of words and persons she had so facilely enacted in her imagination. The whole family had been seated at the supper table and the first silence of beginning the meal was on them. On that silence she ventured forth.

"You know that serge, ma—?"

Mrs. Gelston grunted through a full mouth.

"I think I'll get another collar and cuff set for it."

"With what?"

"Why with the money I'm making."

"Mgg—that—that money ain't going to go so far as you think. How you going to buy me that cut glass bud vase you was talking about if you buy a collar'n cuff set?"

"A set won't cost more'n half a dollar at most."

"Then you can't get that vase for a week or more—"

"Oh yes I can. I'm making more'n you think." It was proceeding beautifully so far; this was an opportunity she hadn't foreseen—and so perfect!

"More'n three dollars? Get a raise?"

"No—you see, it was this way. Jessie Somers had to go to Colfax to a sanitarium, and old man Tritchler and Somers are worried and need more help and asked me wouldn't I help 'em out a little for a while. Cleaning out, it is." (This wasn't so big a lie, though of course she *had* gone to them herself.) "And I said I would. Wasn't that all right? Wasn't it, pa?"

Mr. Gelston had appeared uninterested in the conversation up to this time, content merely to eat as he always did, very seriously, with large movements of his long jaws that almost but not quite broke apart his pursed lips. "Hm-hmm. Guess so," he answered. "When do you work? Can't do it at night."

This was the moment.

"No, of course not. And if I did it after school I couldn't help ma, so—"

"So what?"

"So I quit school. I told you I was going to and I'll have more time to help you now, ma, and I can get you two bud vases and do most of the work too, and—" She gasped for more items to throw upon her mother's astonishment, to pile them on so heavily it could not rise, or could rise only with a flabby smile and "All right, Arlie."

"And . . ." The descending silence, proceeding from her inability to find the details she wanted, was already menacingly huge. She must shatter it! But she could not. . . . Her father had laid down his fork. Her mother's spectacles sat awry upon her nose, and her mouth was open, showing a white pulp of food before she closed her lips and swallowed.

"You quit school, eh, Arlie?" her father echoed.

"You—you tell me"—her mother's voice gathered itself—"you tell me you quit school and didn't say nothing to me!"

"Yes, I thought you'd like it. I'm going to buy you that bud vase and a hand painted china nut bowl, too. Ma, you wanted those for years."

"No you ain't!" her father injected with a vehemence she had seldom heard him use. "You ain't going to buy your ma no vases and painted china with what you earn by quitting school."

Mrs. Gelston had fully recovered. "Oh, she ain't, ain't she? What is she going to do, buy you chewing tobacco? Huh!"

"Yes," Phil put in, "she quit yesterday. Ain't been to school all week far's I know."

"I have too."

"Aw, you ain't and you know you ain't. What's the matter with you, lying that way?"

"I'm *not* lying."

"You are—"

"Shut up, Phil," said Oliver, and then, to his wife: "I tell you that girl ain't going to buy you no gimcrackery with her money. It's her own and she's going to do what she wants with it."

"But pa," Arlie temporized, "if I *want* to get ma the vase and bowl, that's doing what I want with my money, ain't it?"

"Course it is," her mother confirmed.

"I tell you," Oliver's voice rose, and he shook his black hair from his brilliant eyes, "I tell you she ain't. Hear me, or don't you?"

Arlie wondered whether she had made the right play in aligning herself with her mother when all her sympathies were with her father, but the doubt was lost under the perception that her leaving school was being overlooked entirely in the crescendo of dispute.

"You don't need to shout," Mrs. Gelston was saying. "Anybody can hear you. A block away they can."

"Then *you* ought to be able to." Gelston's voice was

louder than before. "And if you can, then shut up, and do as I tell you."

"*What* did you tell me?" Mrs. Gelston's face gathered pugnaciously. "I couldn't hear you tell me nothing for the noise you was making."

"Oh, you didn't, eh? Then I'll tell you again, and this time I want you to listen. *I told you,*" he shouted, his tense dark large face trembling as he leaned forward across his plate, "I told you she wasn't going to buy you no damn' bud vase!" Relaxing: "If you'd ever wash your ears you could hear a little." With his fork he began to peck hen-wise at his potatoes, and advanced a morsel toward his mouth, poising it to inquire in tones that mocked gentleness: "Hear that, did you?"

His wife's flaccid mouth was working. A tear glimmered on the sallow skin beneath her spectacles. To Arlie's absorbed gaze she suddenly went flabby, became spineless flesh, beaten upon.

"Now, pa," Arlie said.

"Shut your face!" He glared at her. Phil snickered and hastily filled his mouth with potato.

"Yes, Oliver Gelston," her mother rallied, "that's the way. Yell at me. Tell me I don't wash enough to suit you. Tell me the potatoes ain't done. You ain't done that yet tonight. Tell me I don't know what work is. Tell me—"

"I ain't telling you nothing like that," he offered, very misldly. "All I'm saying is that you ain't going to have that girl buy you no bud vases with the first money she earns. She can go back to school, that's what she can do. And you can shut up; that's what *you* can do."

"Yes, shut up! That's all you can say. Anything just so you don't learn the truth about yourself."

"Truth, hell! Lot you know about the truth. It's all you can do to get a decent meal, without worrying about the Truth."

"I guess I get as good a meal as any one on what you give me to get it with. Here I scrape along on next to nothing and then get jawed for doing it. When I might have my two hired girls and go to California in the winter if I hadn't been fool enough to marry you."

"Yes, start that Phil Yoder stuff again. You didn't marry him because you couldn't *get* him. That's why. And then you stuck your hooks into me and I was fool enough to fall for it and here we are—"

"Yes, here we are"—in a small mimicking voice. "Mortgage on the house and bills at the store and you likely to lose your job—"

"I'm not."

"You are. And all this rampage because I got a chance to get a little something I want. Like other women have."

"Yes, and get it with blood money. Have your only girl quit school to buy bud vases for you! What are you going to put in that bud vase, cauliflower?"

"I didn't have her quit school. She quit herself. Didn't you, Arlie?" Arlie nodded. "See! She quit herself, just like I said. And yet you go raising hell around here."

"Who's raising hell? I'm not."

"You are too."

"I'm not," Oliver's voice flared, and then he rose, swiftly kicking back his chair and walking over to his wife's, where he stood shaking a long finger in her face. Arlie could see only his back and the futile green stripe in his glossy coat. "Now I want you to listen to me, old lady, while I tell you something for your own good. I've had just about enough of your maunding ways, and if you can't get over them you can pack and get out. I'm going to have some peace and quiet around here. Get me?"

"Fat chance," Phil murmured, to find his father turn-

ing on him with a sharpened face: "Get out, you, before I throw you out." Phil's eyes dully sent back no response. "Get out!" I said, and Oliver swung an arm at his son, who ducked and ran down the hall, slamming the front door behind him with such violence that Arlie gasped.

"That's the way. Break up the house, damn you! . . . Just like your son, and like your damn' Phil Yoder. Christ! Many's the time I wondered if he *was* my son. How in hell do I know? You naming him after Yoder and all. It's always looked damn' suspicious to me."

"Pa!" Arlie recoiled.

"Well, you don't know your ma as well as I do."

"I know her too well for that."

"Yes, that's right, turn against me too."

"I'm not turning against you, pa . . . only I . . ." How was she going to hold both of them?

Mrs. Gelston was sobbing—quiet, slow sobs with many tears, and the sobs hunched her shoulders forward at convulsively regular intervals. Then, ineffectually, she dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron.

"Now stop that," Gelston said. "Stop it, I said. My God! What are you blubbering about? He turned to pace into the kitchen . . . and back. His wife's sobs rose to a shriller note, when Gelston, with a quick step reached her and shook her shoulders. "Stop it, I tell you, *stop it!*" The sobs were choked back, rose again; Mrs. Gelston's fat head, with its thin yellow hair, bobbed grotesquely as she was shaken, and her pendulous cheeks swayed. Gelston seized her throat with his lean hands and tightened his grip. Arlie sat stiff, breathless. Her mother's face grew red and the closed eyes opened to appealing slits. Another sob convulsed her.

"Stop it, I tell you. Stop it!" Gelston shrieked, shook her once more, and let go. "Maybe you'll behave yourself after this," he said. "My Christ, a crying woman!"

He crossed to the hall door, leaned against it, and put his hands in his pockets. It was a gesture of self-control.

When he began to speak again his voice was very quiet, pleading: "Can't you stop that, Mamie? What good does it do you? Can't you see how nervous it'll make you? Come on, now, we've had our little fuss. We always have 'em. Come on, now, stop crying."

As he stood before her, pleading as if he had never been otherwise, he melted into another perspective for Arlie, to whom he had always before been half a super-being, with occasional fits of irritation that had to be humored, yes, but still he had been a person, one of the more important men in the town. She saw him now, a loose-jointed, tense-nerved man, tangled with contradictions. And she knew that there was in him a wispy kindness, even a jocularity at times, and a protection to which on more than one occasion she had fled, not to be disappointed in the rough solace he gave. His curly hair fell over his high forehead; his thin nose seemed to project abnormally, and his nervous blue eyes were wild with light. Then the wildness of light, and its intensity, resolved into the reflection of the single unshaded electric bulb burning over the center of the table, and throwing high lights over the greasy surface of her mother's hair, all that was now visible of the head plumped down upon the flattened arms.

Her mother's sobs reached a new peak of shrillness.

"Oh hell!" Gelston threw the words like a last fire-cracker, swooped down on his hat with a long arm, and departed.

The sobs strained upward, subsided, lifted again. Arlie went to her. "There, ma, don't cry. Don't cry, ma. . . . It's all right now . . . there . . . there. . . ."

The shoulders under her hand twitched, as if to scare off the comforting hand. She got up and blundered through the hall into the parlor. Arlie followed and watched her mother drag a chair to the wide front window—the window from which she had peeked at Herb. She was only sniffling now as she watched a buggy beat dimly past on the road.

"Don't bother me, Arlie. Go on."

"I'm awful sorry, ma. I never saw him as bad as that before."

"He near choked me to death." A dim voice, that Arlie hadn't heard for years.

"Gee, I was scared. . . . In another minute, though, I'd of hit him."

"Another minute woulda been too late."

"Well, he'd never do worse'n that."

"Yes he would. He dragged me around the floor once. . . . When we lived in Acme, it was. . . . But you go on. You'll be late. I'm all right—now."

"Sure, ma?"

"Yes. Go on. I want to be alone."

Arlie went, looking back to see her mother obscurely framed in the front window, wiping at her eyes again. She shouldn't do that . . . at the front window. Arlie could not remember seeing her mother through that window in all the years they had lived there. Surely she hadn't seen her there in the best rocker. It was strange. Fights had torn up evenings and noons before, and many had been more violent, in words at least, than this one. But this had seemed so purposeless, so useless, and had ended so far from the collar and cuff set. It was almost as if something had been for so long accumulating in her father and mother that they had inevitably to discharge it. They would have poured it bitterly out over anything. It had happened to be a bud vase—the one

that sat in the front corner of Nolte's Jewelry Store.

Then she saw the great light in front of the Bijou drop its coppery brilliance over Main Street, and knew that she was late.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KNOWLEDGE OF TIME

I

SATURDAY'S work passed to the accompaniment of a dull discordant music of the thought of Herb. Her letter would be reaching him soon, was in the mailbox, was in his hands. He might come that night, timing his arrival with the end of the snow. She must wait till the very end, for he might not know that she often left soon after the second show started. Then she would have him again and be safe, removed utterly from this interim of harshly silent life, and would be secure in a new world of marriage—more distant than thought from the world of last June, when she had been going with Ned Rickenberg. Ned had come to the show on Friday night; he was working on the Schell farm, he told her—good money. There had been no mention of a “date”: each had tacitly recognized there was nothing between them any more. And she had been kissed by him, had rested in his arms, and had kissed him, thinking him Herb. . . . Unthinkable now. Herb was different; from the first he had been different, as she had known even when they danced together on the Fourth. Ned was nothing but one of the gang of boys around town. Herb had gone to the agricultural college at Ames for two years. Yet he didn't want to farm, he wanted to live in town. Often he had told her so. All the farms his father

owned would come to him and his sister, and the bank stock, too. They would be worth thousands.

This and more he had given her one Sunday afternoon when they had been alone in the car, and content to bask in the mild descending sunshine, knowing that far on within the mist of the dusk they would find each other's arms. The lazy present hour had been better because all was incidental, careless, yet confidential.

Responding, Arlie had romanticized all she knew of her family, breaking Phil Yoder's heart as she made what she could out of her mother's marriage. "She couldn't get along without pa, and pa couldn't without her. But then, pa was sick for years after they was married, or he'd be somebody now, I tell you. He's got a lot of brains, Herb. He's so keen he sees right through you every time. . . . If he hadn't got sick and discouraged nothing coulda stopped him." So she had accounted for the present status of her family, referring vaguely to rich relatives in Illinois.

But Herb had done most of the talking, and she had liked to hear him, especially when he spoke of his grandfather, a man who had made vast purchases of Iowa land at three dollars an acre. "Not an acre of it worth less than two hundred dollars now."

"The old boy had a hard life when he was a kid," Herb had said. "Had to live with relatives that didn't want him. They'd beat him up and work him like a dog, and never give him enough to eat. Damn near starved to death at one place: shut in a granary for three days and nothing to eat and no water. All because he'd been making some money on the side. . . . Well, he got just one idea, land. Land, and then some more land. Iowa land. He got it, too. And then when he got a place and family of his own he stuffed the old house with grub till it tumbled out the doors. He said no one would ever go hungry in his house, and no one ever did.

He'd feed anybody. Dad said he had a great big cool storeroom, and used to buy flour by wagon loads, and big barrels of sugar, and canisters of tea and sacks of coffee, and there'd be a dozen big cheeses on the shelves all at once. Thirty cows they used to milk, and ship butter and sausage straight to some Chicago hotel. I can remember him just once, when I was a kid and went out in the hog lot with him and he cussed some hired men. Big he was, and tall, and had a little pointed gray beard. And say—I can remember how his eyes looked. Blue, they were . . .

"But . . . huh . . ." Herb had chuckled, "I guess it wasn't just land he wanted. Anyway old Milt Ramsay told me once that they had lots of hired girls on the Shuman place. 'Shuman hires and the Mrs. fires.' That's what they used to say, Milt said. I guess Grandma didn't get her gray hair for nothing. . . ."

And when his grandfather had died, Herb's father had had the good sense to hold the acres he inherited, and had bought from his brothers and sisters, whose roving instincts had since scattered them from New York to Idaho, the land that they had wanted less than ready money. Trading, selling, and banks had accounted for the steady increase.

But why had Herb told her all that—especially about the hired girls—if he hadn't been planning for a future in which they would go together in a harmony of understanding because they knew each other better? Or had he been merely bragging? There had been, of course, a little trade about it, one listening to the other for a chance to talk.

He had spoken of his mother, tall, dark, nearly fifty years old now, and without a gray hair. He showed Arlie the picture of her that he carried in his watch. In the first instant she thought it a picture of Herb, and then caught the difference between them—an elusive diff-

erence, since the features were so closely similar. But on the mother's face time had carved with a finer and ironic hand. "She looks like you, Herb, a lot, doesn't she? Like you would if you'd been—oh, I don't know—a minister, maybe, or a priest."

"Huh, me a priest!"

"Well . . ."

"I don't take after Dad at all," he had commented. "Dad never says much and he's a hog for work. Gets up at five and turns in early. Mother likes to go places when she's well enough to. And if she isn't going she's reading."

Was his mother sick?

"Hasn't been well for a year now. Wants to go to California this winter, but Dad thinks she's all right here. He's slow to see some things. She ought to go."

Minute by minute these facts rose and settled as Arlie worked, first at the Saturday baking, then at the Bijou, then at home again. In the evening she often looked up from her change to watch the shuttling of cars and buggies and wagons along Main Street, and peered out slantwise for Herb's car, in her anxiety making the first mistakes in change. She knew it was unreasonable to expect him on Saturday night, because he could not possibly have had her letter before that morning, and if he had been away from the farm he might not get it until Sunday. Yet she watched for him, and even as she turned home sent a last look for his car, which might still emerge from the outflowing stream that was fast leaving the street its barren self.

2

Throughout Sunday Arlie staid home, and as much of the time as possible spent in her own room, hoping every car that turned her way from Main Street was Herb's, and finding hope climb within her as similar cars grew

large and definite and alien along the road. In the evening she went down into the empty house, at last finding her mother on the front porch. They sat silent for a long time, though Mrs. Gelston's rocker creaked volubly; at last she spoke: "I sorta thought that Shuman kid'd be after you today."

"What made you think that?" Arlie inquired from where she was sitting on the top step.

"Well, usually on Sundays he *does* come."

"Didn't you tell me not to go with him any more?" Arlie felt herself slipping easily down hill to a small virtue.

"Did I? I don't remember doing it."

"That night I threw the plate at Phil it was. You said they was tough."

"Phil said so. Didn't know I did."

"Well, you did. So I thought"—the descent grew steeper—"if you didn't want me to go with 'em why I wouldn't."

"Did you sting him?"

"Well, sort of . . . I don't know. . . . I thought you said you didn't want me to go with him, so naturally—"

"Ain't he coming round any more?"

"No, and I wouldn't go with him if he did. I don't like him no more."

Two yellow headlights swung into the street a block away. Her heart jumped and a faint terror lifted her breast. Could it be Herb at last! And how could she go after saying what she had said? Why had she said it? She hadn't meant it. "I mean, ma . . . I mean that of course if you'd *let* me, why . . ."

The car went past . . . a Ford.

"Why what? Go on."

"Oh, nothing . . . I . . ."

"What's the matter with you, anyway? I guess you need to go back to school."

"Oh no, ma, not when I'm making money."

"Making shucks! A lot you're making!"

At ten o'clock Herb had not come and Arlie went up to bed, holding then no hope that he ever would come.

3

She wrote another letter to Herb on Wednesday, and when no answer came on Friday, wandered disconsolately up the hill and down the long slope to Old Town. Again she lingered on the decaying bridge that led to the road skirting the cemetery. With dull fascination she watched the silvery boil and foam of water at the foot of the dam. Evening hung over Old Town as a sheen; remotely the air held an autumnal pungence, and shadows were darkening the enleafed openings of the cemetery. Death lay there supine and his breath was an evening breath, untroubled. In the shadows and green places notes of white and gray wove a stilled melody, and she was drawn forward to loiter among the graves.

Here life was reduced to dates and mounds, and in the newer portion the fashion was to have not even the mounds. Surely some of these people had suffered once as she was suffering. "Carolyn, Beloved Wife of Henry Aldous, 1840-1899." Fifty-nine years, in which there had been—what? Maybe she too had been going to have a baby of her own, and Henry Aldous had married her. "Beloved Wife of—" She had become an attachment, something that belonged. It would be good to belong to Herb. "Beloved Wife of Herbert Shuman, 1893-1962" would be carved on a stone. They would have been old together, and all that mattered now would matter so little then, would be forgotten. She lay down close to the earth, wanting to burrow into its dark; and her body was long and straight beside the grave of Carolyn Aldous, Beloved Wife. She sank through her own obscuring

dream until she was darkly alive to the mist of congregated dreams below the sod, broken up and mingling toward an ancient unity exhaled from the beloved and corrupted wives of earth.

She woke to the subtle richness of the living air; and lying on her back sought with her eyes the upper translucence of sky beyond the hill-shadowed green of the trees. That light was passing, and she must go to work without her supper. There would be bickering when she reached home. Well—there was time yet. She didn't have to fight her mother for hours, not until nine, till ten. And she didn't have to endure the birth for months. Within the moment, as she lay flat upon the immense round of earth, the future that had been piled mountainously and torturingly high upon her, spread flat in the pattern of its own rounding weeks and larger months and years; and she was freer to live through it day by day, as it would come, flatly and incidentally. Over that time she would move dominant.

Dominant moment: her body was mysterious and crafty. She was proud of it. "I don't have to live it all at once; oh, I don't!" She half tongued the words behind her lips, which did not break apart for speech. "These—these people took years to be themselves. They lived along, and I will too, even if Herb don't come."

She stood up, and more fully aware of the evening light was thankful for it. Was rain coming? Sultriness closing in. . . . Could she carry away with her and preserve, preciously clear and untouched, this serenity? Greasy dishes with the yellow of egg hardened on the glaze. Drip of words. Clutter of talking to people . . . She wanted to lie down again and lose herself in that dreamful corruption of the earth. Lost in its gloom, its rot, its strength, one of the black wives of earth, lost and healed; and time again thinner than the air. For she

would weaken, and the horrible suction of what was ahead would tug at her till only her body stood in the present and September. That tugging would confuse and wrench. . . . She must not lift up her eyes to those hills —high! Eyes down: the Bijou, Somers, the bud vase for her mother. Could she live in all that, week after week? Could she hold herself from that disastrous moment when she might again hurl herself over the days and up the months? She could try; even now she could try, even if she did fail. It was all so confusing. . . . She walked on.

4

Another week of drizzling rains had passed, and no letter had come from Herb. She wrote again, but this time registered the letter.

"Want a return receipt for it?" Tessie Medlin had asked, leering palely above her nose glasses. Tessie had filled out the forms with a suppressed smile.

"Receipt, what do you mean? for a letter?"

"I mean do you want the party you're sending it to sign a receipt? Then they send it back to you, and you're sure he got it and no one else."

"Why, yes."

She turned from the window with relief. Now she would know whether he received it or not, and so would have at least one indication out of the signless absence into which she had committed her letters. If only she had done that before! But she had not known about the return receipt, and might not have used the knowledge anyway. It had been hard enough to register the letter; her impulse had been to slip down to the station and mail it on the train, for she was beginning to dread the townspeople. Tessie Medlin, with her knowing smile, had been bad enough. She'd mention the fact that Arlie Gelston had mailed a registered letter "to that fellow of hers up

at Lawson," and they'd all speculate on it in loud voices, so that every one in the post office would know. It would be talked about at half a dozen supper tables.

Anyway, it was done.

5

September, with its cool evenings and the flies flat upon the screens as they sought the warmth within, merged through gold into the varied brilliance of October, a time when the human sense of smell, long disused, stirs drowsily from its torpor to feel within the air its secret of decay: spice of broken weeds, dust of leaves, and the acrid pleasure of blue bonfire smoke.

But it was the season of her body rather than the season of the year that made Arlie's nostrils sensitive, though for long the knowledge was mere uncoiled sensation and action: she would hesitate, returning home from work, before she opened the door on the stuffiness within, dominated by the reek of cooking. The early morning hours indoors were almost unendurable, but she translated it all, at first, into the too excessive presence of the house, her parents, the whole situation. "I want to get out of it so. I want to get away," she would say to herself. "This place fills me up." Then one morning she understood, for when she came into the smoky kitchen the fumes seemed to overcome her. She barely escaped in time to hide from her mother the wrench of nausea. "Morning sickness," she gasped to herself, and when she could again return to the kitchen, tried determinedly for composure.

"What's the matter with you?" her mother inquired.

"Forgot my handkerchief," she murmured. "Got a cold."

The next morning she felt as usual until she rose and moved about, but was able to control the qualms of her

stomach until breakfast time. When she had eaten she was steady again. . . . Did the secret lie in that? Would food aid her always? Thereafter she prepared a little lunch at night—she had always “pieced,” so that her lunch caused no comment—and secreted part of it in her dress as she went upstairs, eating it in the morning before she stirred from bed. This method did not always succeed in giving her comfort; but it did allay the worst of the spasms that would otherwise seize her, and she succeeded perfectly in concealing the condition from her mother.

With partial control established she was free for other worries. She had known such a thing was in store for her, but had forgotten. . . . How much else had she forgotten? She had come much too close to a complete betrayal to wish anything more disastrously open.

Dress would be her greatest problem.

For one thing she could insist on a loose winter coat, and if only she could buy it herself would get an extra large one. Her mother must be kept from shopping with her, as she would want to do. Or perhaps a mail order house? She spent hours with the pages of coats, at last deciding on a blue one, cut loosely, and ordering a 38 rather than the 36 she knew she required. When it came her mother was grieved—her advice had not been asked—then torrential to a degree that made Arlie repack the coat in its box to return it. But in her room she took it out for one more look and one more trial before the mirror. It was such a pretty coat. Pity it was so large. . . . Maybe she'd better get the 36 after all. . . . Admiring herself she forgot her purpose in getting it too large. She moved suddenly away from the mirror, but the coat, catching on a broken handle of the lowest bureau drawer, checked her course. With a gasp she turned, she might have torn it!

Then, with great deliberation, she walked on, tugging.

It took a harder pull than she had foreseen, but at last the cloth zipped and gave. Solemnly she inspected the tear, a triangle at least five inches long.

"Just pack it careful," her mother urged when she took it down, "and tell 'em it was tore when it came and you won't accept it."

"No, ma, I won't. It can just be a lesson to me. I went and bought it without asking you, and it turned out something I don't want. And then I tore it myself, and I'll just wear it. . . . Then next time I'll remember not to be so darned bullheaded. It just serves me right."

Mrs. Gelston was placated, and watched Arlie spread the cloak out to finger the tear dolefully.

"I ain't got no thread that color," she said, interestedly, settling to mildness as she saw the tears gather in Arlie's eyes and mistook them for tears of repentance.

6

The return receipt for her letter came a day before Herb's answer, and came from Chicago. Why? What had happened? For twenty-four agitated hours Arlie wondered. Had he gone there to escape her? But he wouldn't know, not having any unmistakable word from her. In black, gigantic Chicago he was lost to her.

His letter came:

"Dear Arlie:

"You will be wondering what sort of thing has happened to me that I am writing to you from Chi, but Dad was coming in here on business just after I saw you last and wanted me to come along and it didn't take me long to say yes. We are staying at some relatives of mine, and I started right in having a good time. I have some cousins here who seem to know the town moderately well. Too well, I am afraid some people would think. I wish that you could be here too.

"I am going home in a day or two now, and then I will drive over to Coon Falls and see what it is that seems so important to you, though probably I have a good hunch already.

"How do you like working at the Bijou? Remember the night we went there first and then for a little spin? I'll probably be over next Sunday evening. So long until then.

"As ever,

"HERBERT P. SHUMAN."

She folded her troubles away and put them with the sheets into the envelope, and knew until Sunday a wry peace.

He came about five o'clock, Arlie ran out and the car roared away. Neither spoke until they were well out of town and rolling between the cornfields of mangy gold.

"Well, what's it all about?" he asked, with careful carelessness, yet with a tinge of impatience.

Arlie did not answer immediately. She was pushing out with her mind, seeking to work and worm her way to the very center of his, repulsed and eternally baffled by their human separateness. Within that head, behind the narrow brow and dark glint of the eye, behind and within all, lay a feeling, a word, a sentence, desires and decisions that were going to change all or condense for her the outspreading misery. She was much less confident now of Herb's response, and as she fingered possible words she was too absorbed to note how far removed this reality was from the immediate succor that in her dreams he was to offer, even to force upon her weakly protesting self. . . . "What's it all about?" had he asked? The current of self flickered to blankness for a second, as the lights do at times, then flowed on, bright, vague, about to break into words, futile words. . . .

"Well!" He was impatient now.

"You know, Herb, those rides we took?"

He smiled without turning to her. The smile made it harder. "Yes, yes. Go on," he said. "Get it out of your system."

"I can't . . . talk here. Let's stop somewhere. I can't think when we're going so fast."

"All right." His tone was curt. They flew up a hill, swooped down with the speed of a fall on emptiness and rolled solidly on the level road. The car picked up, the river gleamed coldly ahead, and they swung through trees to a little covert by the bank. Dying vegetation, colored russet and sage, lined the slow banks toward a smoky haze at the distant curve. There the sun was overlaying the muddy green water with a last bar of gold that faded even as they sat there, silent.

"Not a bad place," said Herb. "Wish I'd found it before. . . . Well, shoot."

"Well," she echoed, "you know those last rides we had . . . well, they got me. I'm going to have a baby."

"Yes . . . ?" He did not seem at all perturbed as he drew forth a cigarette and lit it, deliberately, before settling back. "I sorta thought that was what you were going to pull."

"Pull?"

"Yes, pull!" Anger spoke, and Arlie flinched into herself. "It's a damn' fine scheme, that's all I got to say. Only it don't work with yours truly."

"I haven't any scheme, Herb. Honest I haven't. That's it. I don't know what to do. I thought maybe you'd . . ."

"Yes, you thought I'd marry you all right. Only I won't. Get that?" But his eyes broke from the directness of her own.

"Oh," her voice rose, "you thought I meant to pull this just to get you to marry me when I'm not going to have a kid at all." Unexpectedly it hurt her to say

"kid," and she lowered her voice and looked away; her mind turning stupidly in an effort at thought.

"I guess," Herb said in a minute, "I guess I talked too damn' much about my dad's farms. It must have been too much for you. Is your mother going to help out on this too?"

"My mother don't know. Nobody does, except you."
"I'll bet."

"But I wouldn't lie to you, Herb. Oh, my God, I wouldn't! Listen to me. I'm telling you the truth. I can't prove it to you—yet. But I am. . . . I did think maybe you'd marry me. I—"

"Huh, glad you admit it."

Her face whitened as she turned to him. "Look here, Herb Shuman, I'm telling you the truth and you know it, even if you won't admit it. What do you want me to do, come to you with your kid in my arms? I guess if you could have morning sickness about once you'd know."

"What's that, morning sickness?"

"You throw up, every morning. That's what it is, and I wish to God you could have it once."

"Thanks. Don't care for any." He flipped his shortened cigarette into the river, where it sizzled out, and lit another.

"That's it, joke about it. But it's a darn poor joke."

"Oh hell." He jumped out of the car and loitered along the river bank, tossing pebbles into the river to watch the circles grow. Neither said a word, and in a few minutes he wandered back to lean against the door of the automobile. "Now listen," he said. "Do you swear to God that you're going to have a kid?"

"I've told you," she said.

"And you're damn' sure it's mine?"

Pain quivered on the face that was watching him, a face that in the obscuring twilight seemed magically to

keep its tense white and lonely blueness of eyes. "Of course it's yours. Who else I been with?"

"That's what I'd like to know. The Fourth you was with Rickenberg, and how do I know but Dolly's been coming over since I been in Chicago? He used to talk about you enough."

"Dolly?"

"Yes, Dolly. . . . I see you're interested."

"I'm not. I don't like him at all. Pimply old fool!" Herb grinned. "Furthermore, Herb Shuman, you know, way down deep you do, that you don't need to talk about any one but yourself. You know yourself you were coming every night."

"Oh well—hell! Let it drop." More evidently now, he was disturbed, and Arlie, watching his face, began to hope. And hope brought mildness.

"You see, Herb—my God! It ain't anything I *want*. And if you think it's pleasant business to talk with you this way why you got another guess coming. I'd give anything—*anything*—to get out of it."

"When's the kid due?" he asked.

"About the first of May—near as I can figure it. I don't know really. It's nine months."

"Oh hell . . . of course."

"But Herb, what am I going to do?"

"How do I know?"

"If you'd just say something . . . definite. . . . ("Say that you'll marry me, marry me"—echoed within her.)

"I was going out to California with mother," he thought aloud. "We were going to stay there till spring. Go in November. She ain't been well. I was telling you about it. And I *got* to go with her."

"Why?" (Coon Falls and spring, and Herb in California—.)

"Dad won't go. Says he can't, and I guess he's right. He's got some big deals on, and Gloria's at the U. She'd

worry mother half to death anyway. And mother's been so sick . . . means her life maybe. . . . It's just about up to me to go along. . . . Besides, I want to."

(Wildness: couldn't he take me? But she did not ask it. . . . That was it, he wanted to go.)

"Of course," she said, "what I got *my* heart set on, what I want to do, is to have a kid back in Coon Falls with no name. What *I* want is to have everybody in the country talk about me, and to slink around town like a whipped dog, and have ma hell me around at home for the rest of my life, and never be able to work or play or anything. Just stay at home . . . home, with ma . . . *that's* what I want to do." She crunched into a heap, bent awkwardly so that her side was slowly wrenched as she lay there sobbing.

Herb watched her silently. Shadows lay across his golden winter, his plans were interfered with for the first time. Even if he went he could not go with the light heart and the careless eagerness he had used in the past. The beauty of mountain and grove would not be flung casually before him that he might be careless with it. Youth, when one can look on beauty without pain, was dropping from him with each difficultly taken breath of the girl before him. "There, Arlie, don't cry. . . . We'll fix it somehow. I didn't know . . . I didn't believe it. . . . But I do now. . . . Come on, stop crying."

A long breath and sighing expiration. "That's it, that's it. . . . It'll be all right now . . . only we got to think, think it out. There, stop. Stop it, I tell you! My God, Arlie"—shaking her—"can't you control yourself? Stop it, I tell you!"

She sat up, wiping at her inflamed eyes; her cheek was stained and embossed by the pressure against the folds of the seat. "I—I can control myself as well as you can." A gasp.

"Now listen, Arlie," he soothed, "we got to get this straight. We can't marry on nothing, and I can't see how I'm going to get out of that trip to California. If I don't go—well—suppose mother died? How'd I feel then? Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see. How I'll feel don't matter, I suppose."

"Hell!" he shouted at her. "Can't you listen to reason? Say, can't you? Any one'd think you'd gone nuts. What's wrong with you?"

"Everything . . . nothing," with the words just audible.

"I guess everything is, all right. . . . But you do your best to listen while I tell you a few things. In the first place I simply ain't got the money to marry. I blew every damn' cent I had in Chicago, and checked on dad for every cent he'll stand for, for the next six months. And mother won't give me nothing till we get started for California. Now, can you get that through your head?"

"Yes"—meekly.

"I ain't got a damn' cent—"

"Oh, I heard you. Go on: you ain't got a damn' cent."

"Well . . . well? How can we marry on nothing?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't suppose we can. . . . I'm too tired to think. Get in, and let's go back."

"In a minute"—with words more hurried now—"I want you to understand, Arlie. I'm not trying to put anything over on you. I'd just as soon marry you as not, only . . ."

This, from the man who in her dreams had so triumphantly swooped to her rescue, lifting her out of Coon Falls, to journey with her, prosperously and immaculately, down a straight level road of marriage! It was hard to turn even her head, weighted as it was, to note the fingers fidgeting on the car door. His gaze was ab-

stracted, and what lay behind his eyes she did not even care to discover. In the attempt lay inevitable frustration.

"Only what?" she at last prompted, wanting above all now to work through until Herb could go—free or bound she did not care—and she herself return to the old worry and inertia, as one who goes back to misery with relief, because that at least is an unchanging and certain home. She would not have known herself had Herb magically cleared the road down which she saw only the gathering mists.

"Arlie, I . . . it's too damn' hard. I don't want to marry yet. What could I do? Dad wouldn't help me in a scrape like that. He's old-fashioned. And mother, it would break her heart."

The light was dim, but Arlie could see that his face was not under control. Was he going to cry! A chord was struck in her, and far within she heard its dim resonance, and reached a hand toward him. "Get in, Herb," she said gently. "Just a minute, before we go." Dumbly he climbed into the seat and her hands caressed him. She was close to tears herself. "I don't want to make you feel so bad about it, Herb. I—it isn't all your fault, I know. Back in the summer I give you what you wanted, but I wanted it too. I know I did. We was together, that was all. I could just feel then, I couldn't see. I don't know it woulda made any difference if I coulda seen. I know it wouldn't. I'm not blaming you, Herb, but it was so awful. I had to tell some one. Who was there but you? But, Herb, I never meant to make you marry me if you didn't want to. I guess I didn't think that you wouldn't want to. I—" She stopped. She could not go on. The sky that for the past few moments had been light with a strange pallor of green, had darkened menacingly to the opaqueness of the river water. Clouds were massive; and like a ghostly

lightning, infinitely pale and infinitely fine and harsh, malignancy returned, bathing the low heaven with subtle poison hovering above her. Something would strike. Under it she was again small, shrunken, helpless.

"You didn't think that I wouldn't want to?" her last words returned to her, echoed in a voice not her own, of a deeper timbre, petulant . . . *his* voice, bridging so thinly the gulf of their separation. What had she to do with him, this other, and what could he mean to her in her aloneness?

Again the voice: "What's the matter? What you thinking of now? What other notion you got in your head?" Incredibly remote he seemed as he talked, talked. What was in her head? Tell him . . . ? What could be told?

"Nothing, Herb." His name was a word to test, a word she had used once, but now meaningless. "Herb . . . Herb"—a funny sound. "I want to go home." Her voice was as far off as his own. "Crank up, will you? I gotta work tomorrow."

When they were half way home Herb began to talk, and talked incessantly. He'd see what he could do. Maybe he could get some money. Perhaps his mother wouldn't have to go to California. Anyway, didn't she see that they couldn't be married without cash, good hard old cash, to live on. And he didn't have it, not a damn' cent. "But don't worry, old girl. I'll see you out of this. Somehow we'll manage, just as quick as I can get some cash."

She assented briefly, wanting to be home, free, alone.

She was surprised, by Monday afternoon, to find that the give she had found in him in place of the strength she had sought, was not going to disconcert her as much as she had expected the night before, when she had gone to sleep thinking she would awaken to a new access of misery that she was then too tired to find real. But

her last thought that night had been a wandering pity
for Herb, who was finding as she had found, where she
had been playing pleasantly in warm and shallow waters
—a deep and a sudden cold.

CHAPTER IX

WINTER GROWTH

I

ONE morning toward the middle of November as Arlie lay awake in the chill of arriving dawn, she realized that she was foreseeing the hours of the day calmly and without dread. She remembered then the darkness by the grave of Carolyn Aldous, and her momentary triumph over fear and time. When she had walked away from the cemetery she had found herself losing, with every step, the valiance that had risen in her; in the putter of succeeding days it had been not only lost but forgotten. She had forgotten it, but—"I've done it anyway," she said aloud.

She did not look into causes, knowing now only that after the talk with Herb she had quietly accepted her condition as if he had withdrawn from her life completely. Her thought of him still wandered toward pity, as for one who had been too greatly disturbed for his capacity to bear disturbance.

Of late her energy had gone into reducing her work to as strict a routine as her mother would permit. She rose at six, built the fire in the range, brought in coal, started breakfast, and attacked the supper dishes that were always left for her. When breakfast was nearly ready her mother, in stocking feet, would blink her way into the kitchen, wash perfunctorily at the sink,

and grunt laboriously as she drew on her shoes. Shortly after, her father would come in to comb his kinked hair until it shone in straight black separate strands over his forehead and down to his eyes, when he would part it carefully and brush it in scrolls above his temples. Phil, after being called repeatedly, would whistle in by the time the others had finished breakfast. But these and all the other irregularities that she could, Arlie caught into her scheme and was not disturbed. She had learned to expect Phil to be late, her mother to be critical and changeable, and her father to be sullen until he had eaten.

The work at the Bijou she organized even more thoroughly, for there she was freer; by this time she could do all the cleaning in two-thirds the time necessary in September.

As winter approached she was glad of this, for the great room with its creaking seats was chillier, and, in its chilliness, emptier than ever. In the afternoons an hour or two often opened before her; then she would tat, embroider, read. Or, when she knew her mother was gone for some time, she would try to shift her clothes to a looser pattern, for already they were too tight, despite the pressure which her strenuously laced corset put upon her developing body. Her mother was complaining about the general slouchiness of her dress: "What you buy them great big middies for and wear 'em now? Why don't you save 'em till summer and wear 'em?" She complained too of the coat, its bagginess, its color, the triangular tear. "Well, it's my own money, ma," Arlie would reply, "and I'm going to buy what I want with it, I don't care what you say."

After Thanksgiving, in the afternoon hours, she found her embroidery or magazine slipping from useless fingers. Her eyes would be heavy. She began to take long naps, first loosening her corset, and releasing herself into contentment without future before she dulled into dreams.

The first dreams would waken her to a twisting, acrid consciousness of something wrong, something awry, but what she could not remember. Then, with her eyes decreasingly aware of the slits of light along the drawn blinds, she would fall into a sound sleep that was invariably refreshing. So it always was—first the sleep of haggard dreams, of which no images but only the poisonous disturbance remained, and then the deep cold of forgetfulness, out of which she ascended confident and strong for the day's darkening but busy hours.

2

Letters from Herb had come at irregular intervals reflecting again and again what he had said on the ride home. His mother was very weak, he wrote, but his father was thinking more favorably of going to California too. In which case they could "make some arrangement."

To the first letters Arlie replied briefly, hoping that he would "manage to help" her. "I don't want you to marry me if you can't be happy with me," she wrote once, "but I think you can. How will you feel later on to have a son growing up down here and have him yours and not be married to his mother? I wish you could talk to your own mother about it, if it wouldn't make her too sick. Maybe she would see it like I do. And I love you Herb and don't think I can ever love anybody else. I want to talk to you sometimes but not if you talk the way you did that last Sunday." And in another: "I guess from what I have learned I could make you marry me if I wanted to but I don't want to make you. I want you to want to yourself. I have burned all your letters so I can't do anything to you with them." (This, after she had slipped into a back seat in the Bijou one stormy night to see on the screen some rainy film

in which a packet of letters after playing a central rôle, had gone up in smoke in a great marble fireplace, with hero and heroine sentimentally watching them.) "Besides, I was afraid ma might get hold of them. So you see where I stand."

This last letter crossed in the mails with a short note from Herb:

"*Dear Arlie:*

"Please find enclosed fifty dollars (\$50.00) in ten dollar bills. It's all the cash I can get together now but you can see it isn't enough to get married on. I expect to have more shortly, when I will write you and let you know what I am planning. Don't worry kid, because I will help you out just as soon as I can.

"As ever,

"HERBERT SHUMAN."

She answered:

"I am putting away the bills you sent, though I would like to send them back, so you couldn't feel you had done anything for me. But you see I am right where I got to keep it. In a way I am glad too, because the bills mean you have been thinking about me and something has been bothering you. You can't be happy now, and I know you can't. You thought that Sunday the best thing to do was to get away from me. It's harder to have me near I suppose and a lot easier to poke me away with a letter. When you get done talking to me I am still sitting by you and you don't like it, but when you mail a letter, well—

"But now I know you Herb and I know you're not going to have a good time when I am not. In a way I wish you was going to. Somebody ought to be happy.

"ARLIE G."

No answer came. She wondered if he had decided to write no more because she had reminded him of the possible uses of letters, and was afraid; or whether he had

given up all thought of helping her and was leaving the outcome to time, as was she. In any event no more letters came, and gradually, as the days shortened through December, she ceased to wonder whether he would write again; but at mail time her mind rose to a distant climax, and the sight of a Des Moines paper thrown on the table by her father when he came home at noon was always dissatisfying because it was only itself.

3

One Sunday night after the lugubriously uneventful Christmas had passed, Mrs. Gelston was restless; the Sunday papers had been read into a torn confusion on the floor; there seemed to be nothing more to talk about. Mrs. Gelston decided to go to church. She told Arlie to get ready. "Take off those awful middies and put on your serge." Arlie was recalcitrant—she was not going. Spatter of words to a compromise: she would go if her mother wouldn't make her change her clothes; she was too tired to do both. Febrile acquiescence. They departed.

It had been, it seemed to Arlie, long years since she had gone to church. They crunched their way down the lonely snow-packed sidewalk to Main Street and beyond. As they walked, Arlie glimpsed those other Sabbaths far back in the gigantic perspective in which youth remembers its few years—years that dwindle to sunny antiquity and haze. She had been small then, and her mother, tall and enormously powerful, had dragged her along the hot streets, painfully, by one arm. Through the massive church music had boomed and died, and a large man had spoken words that made her shiver. Hymns, prayer, silence, and the Lord's Prayer. . . . Once she had been reprimanded for telling her mother, after service, that when the minister said the Lord's

Prayer it had been just like petting a cat: after a while the cat began to purr.

But now she was taller than her mother, and she wouldn't be likely to say anything offensive. And the church was smaller; the temple, once spacious, was compressed now, insufficient, but intimate. The congregation was simply the people she knew, but a little quieter, and a little stiffer in their better and uncomfortable clothes. It was even good to be among them, to feel them all around. Yes, she would come again, and without her mother—who sat beside her with shut lips and a body primly held.

A week later she did return, and alone.

The mid-winter revival was close at hand, and the minister was working toward it, preparing for a conviction of sin. "And there shall be no more weeping nor sighing, for the former things are passed away." From the text were evolved brimstone and eternal magic, sudden and monstrous growths . . . with everything paling toward tears and the climacteric light of a Presence. Arlie worked on the harsh words that rose to the gray song of biblical cadence. Tension—relief. From front to back the congregation in a wave stood up. Stood up and sang: "Earth hath no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal." A sob gathered in her throat. It was to be controlled, so that she might join in the singing, as she did, though with faint voice. They were all together, dwelling in impermanence, and going toward the light and rest. It was so good—so good—to be of them. The revival meetings were coming. . . . "Now-may-the-peace-of-the-Lord abide with us henceforth and forevermore. Amen." They turned, coats were put on, they moved slowly into the aisles.

Near the door Arlie met Belle Ritchie, whom she had not seen for weeks; but Belle wandered back into the crowd to seek La Verne Shattuck. For a moment Arlie

waited, thinking Belle might return. Belle did, but pushed on with La Verne, their heads bent together. They gave Arlie not a glance . . . of course they would be going different ways outside, but . . . Was it the first cut? Surely Belle couldn't know. Herb was the only one who knew. Or did people suspect? Only two or three had spoken to her. . . . She walked out and down the steps.

Somebody clattered down the steps after her, as if trying to catch up. "Hello there!"—just at her shoulder. Arlie turned: it was Miss Haggerty, the teacher.

"Oh," said Miss Haggerty, "I thought it was one of the teachers. No matter . . . I guess we go the same way, don't we?"

"I guess so," Arlie replied, turning west. "I go this way." They walked on.

"It's a little colder tonight after the thaw, isn't it?" Miss Haggerty settled her fur collar closer about her neck.

"A little," Arlie admitted. She felt uncomfortable, and hoped Miss Haggerty would turn at the next corner.

"But it's good to get out of that stuffy church; I thought I'd suffocate with all that brimstone."

"Oh, you mean—about hell, and salvation and all?"

"I suppose I do. . . . Yes, certainly. Imagine—all that in the twentieth century. Garden of Eden . . . huh! . . . I used to believe it myself though, until I went to the university."

"I guess they're all atheists down there," Arlie commented.

"Atheists . . . ? Oh. Let's see. I wonder if we know each other. I'm Miss Haggerty: teach in the high school. Your face seems familiar?" This while they were under the corner light.

"I'm Arlie Gelston. I was in your class the first of the year, until I quit school. I work at the Bijou now."

"Oh yes, of course. That's where I've seen you. . . . Arlie Gelston, you said? I've heard your name."

(Heard my name. . . . What about my name? She fled from the mention of names, striking blindly back at what had been said.) "I suppose *you* think there isn't any heaven and hell?"

"Oh, I won't say quite that. It depends on how you interpret the words, I suppose. Maybe they're real and maybe they're superstitions, half beautiful sometimes, and lurid. But I suppose I shouldn't talk this way. I'm glad you're not one of my students. Maybe," she laughed, "you won't tell on me."

"I never tell on any one. I wouldn't. . . . But don't you believe in . . . life after death?" Hushed words.

"No, I don't think so."

"Then what's death?"

"Why ask me? I don't know. As far as *I*'m concerned it's a black hole you drop into, and keep on dropping."

"And . . . and never stop?"

"Nope." With a laugh.

"Gee . . . I never thought that . . . I . . ." She was frightened and dizzy. Earth hath no sorrow. . . . Would there never be healing, but only a black dropping away from worries and confusions, and nothing ever set right? Her eyes wavered, seeking answer and refuge in the cold pallor of moonlight on the dirty buildings and white land. Heartless light. She heard only the murmur of words at the rupture of their progress when Miss Haggerty turned down a side street. Alone again on the lonely walk. . . . This—this light, lay somehow beyond the murk of God, was alone final and real. Every one believed it in his heart. Her mother? Phil . . . Surely not. But what people believed must matter to them. These strange hidden . . . darkening over. They must be shut out. You couldn't live under all that. She

would go back to the church. People all around, comforting you, believing things. She had never heard of anything else. She would go back.

Tranced, she entered the house, undressed, and knelt by her bed to pray, to conjure back the old hope; and before its failure to come she was inarticulate. Yet when she climbed into bed she thought she had prayed.

She woke to a slaty day and to the thought of the washing. In the night all fear had left. Barely could she recall it. Funny. . . . There would be the torturous wringer and the cold lines on which her mother would insist that she hang the stiffening clothes. Maybe it would warm to a thaw, as it had yesterday. Though that would make worse the soapy choking steam of the kitchen. Then, as a fish leaps out of the water, so leapt into her body's consciousness the stir of the child within.

The succeeding minutes were given in their fullness to watching her body, that held now a stirring gesture of the world's significance—a gift from which Herb was wholly separated—yes, and even herself. A new fact in the dirty tumult of the world, that she caressed and admired, and shrank from in quick panic, closing her eyes and burying her head under the covers, seeking dark, seeking existence without foresight and without memory.

She rushed out of bed, and in dressing pulled her corset strings till she feared a cry from within. She went downstairs feeling as if she were committing a slow and silent murder, from which release must come soon and decisively if she were to live.

5

The next morning's train for Lawson had Arlie for one of its passengers. As the automobile makes it the distance from Coon Falls to Lawson is only a little above

eight miles; by train it is more than thirty, with a long wait at Shelley Junction.

Leaving her work at the Bijou until she could return in the afternoon, Arlie had boarded the train without her ticket, lest her father know of her trip. She gave herself no clear reason for her action. Panic would have made her clutch out for protection to anybody who might have been near to offer it—would have made her clutch out hoping to be held and assured. The ride to Lawson was only the elongation of such an impulse, with no more of reason behind it than would have been behind the simple outreaching of her hand.

The train jolted on between thawing fields, water trickling brightly down the gullies; black lined the gray ridges. As the train noised away Arlie had rest, and a measure of escape from the stiffening circumstance of the last months, but in this interval running to a close she found herself speculating. After all, why was she going? Since he had sent the fifty dollars Herb had not written. Why? And in what had she been sunk that she had ceased to care? Hadn't she been thinking at all through these weeks? Months they were now. She would have to find the way out to Herb's. It was two or three miles, she remembered, an easy walk. She hoped Herb would be alone in the house. Otherwise a talk with him would be difficult to arrange.

"Shelley Junction," the brakeman cried.

After she had changed cars and was on the train for Lawson she dozed, pulling the blind against the brilliance of the sun. If only she could pass her life on trains—constant change, new people, new towns, no worries. If she were . . . she dozed in brightness, conscious of diffused light but too inert to move. Let it beat on her, she could not care, and could not be expected to pull the blinds on all the windows. She had on her own; that was enough. The long car lurched and ran. . . . An

old couple across the aisle sat too stiffly to enjoy themselves. What if they were Herb's parents? Clicking of rails. The whistle sang to the bright air. Behind her people were talking. She would talk—to Herb, happy and secure then, for Herb would, surely he would, care for her now and keep her.

"Lawson."

Off the train she felt secure until it pulled away and she saw it dwindle down the track. Desolation fell with its old inertia. She could not move. When she did she walked slowly down Main Street, staring dully at the loafers in the pool hall, who edged to the window to follow her with their stare—a clumsy figure in a loose, baggy coat, and with avid blue eyes under a black hat. Could they, who had never seen her, tell what was beneath the thick coat? But why on earth was she wandering around so aimlessly? She had come to Lawson to find Herb, to tell him . . . to have him care for her. This was not finding him.

Back at the station she asked the agent if he could tell her the way to Shuman's farm. He looked at her oddly from his Swedish face. "Take the road along the track out to the first turn to the right. Then a mile north. It's a big white house with a big red chimney all the way up. You can't miss it."

"It's about two miles, isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, two—maybe three. I don't know. 'Round there anyway. Going to walk?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Awful bad walking, I'd say. Why don't you 'phone Shuman and tell him to come for you. Are you a relative or something?"

"No, I'm not a relative. Thank you—for the information."

"Sure, call again. Lots of information here."

For a distance along the track she could use the ce-

ment sidewalk on which the mush of snow was seldom over half an inch deep, and often only a surface. The first rods of the road, she hoped as she splashed through them, would be the worst of all, but soon she decided they were the best she was likely to meet.

The last house was left behind and the first long slope of the hill began. Her feet stuck, slipped, discouragingly sloshed around. She would be a sight by the time she got there. Would she be able to show herself at all? The large coat, flouncing around her, was being spattered along the lower border, and her feet were ponderous clods, shapeless as blots. And yet, she was covering the distance. Behind her rose the dingy cubes of the town and the frayed gray veil of trees, a mess of houses that made inviting even the slopes of grizzled fields with their broken yellow cornstalks, and even the road that at its crest hit the dull flank of the sky. The road seemed to stop, leaving a jump into the gray misery of the day, from which at some moment the sunshine had been withdrawn.

She was hot, and unbuttoned her collar. The coat was plastered and dripping now, her shoes indiscernible under the mud. Her dress must be as bad as the coat, she reflected, but did not wish to look; the mirror that morning had revealed an unmistakable fullness of the waist. At the time gladness had taken her—it would be proof. Now, with the turn of the road not reached, it was heaviness. At the crest of the hill she made out a white house with evergreens around it, set across an interminable width of slope and level land. "Bright Valley" the farm was called. Herb had said so.

At the bottom of the hill she thought she could go no farther, her feet floundered, slid disastrously, making her almost lose her balance, which she regained only with gasping effort. The crossroads, when she reached them,

dazed her with the necessity of choice. Blindly she turned at last into the black of the next mile. She had not eaten enough breakfast, she needed dinner, and the heaviness of the child came to be as lead. Her coat was hopeless now and her hat had slid far back on her disordered hair, sweaty wisps of which had been plastered tightly to her forehead.

The physical exertion was sinking to its own plane, but her mind whirled on a round of thought she could not stop, a round propelled by the labor of her feet, her legs, her whole body: She had the proof now and would show it to Herb, show it to Herb. He would have to believe, he couldn't help it. Then, when he did, her trouble was over, over for good. She was free of her mother, free of Coon Falls, free of her brother. They must be having dinner at home, and her father would be complaining about the potatoes. He always complained, and always they fought.

With every step she heard her father's petulant voice, and could not dislodge his face as he looked up to complain, about the mud, the horrible slipperiness. It had been so different when Herb had come for her in the car. He would help her out now, out of Coon Falls, and home with its dinner, that they would be eating now, and her father complaining about the potatoes, and about the mud that was rising to meet her and had given way beneath her foot, and was letting the cold of its grease soak through coat and dress to her knees. Mud slipped between her stiff fingers. . . .

She had fallen and must get up.

She moved, then was quiet on all fours, the coat spreading on the murk of the road, the hat falling forward to reveal the narrow width of neck. Her hands, outstretched to save her, clutched mud. A sound from her lips, then words: "I can't. . . ."

But she rose, wiped her face with her arm, leaving streaks of mud, and stared inanely ahead before she started on.

Ten minutes later she sat on a stone step by the side of the road, cleaning her face, and scraping mud from her shoes with a stick. The evergreens behind her concealed these operations from view of the house, and she felt safe. The relief of sitting down had revived her to the point where she could roughly think, but the result of her thought confused her more than the preceding tumult. Stick in hand, she stared at the sodden fields and useless fence. Now that she was here just what was she going to do? What had she expected when she had set out? Everything beyond taking the train had been a blur, and the blur a wall beyond which she had not looked. Boarding the train had been like pushing a lever—greater forces than she realized had been released: distance had been traversed, time consumed, Lawson reached; and in Lawson the only thing to do had been to get out of the town, to look for Herb, to walk. She had walked, was there—was here, in front of the evergreens that hid Herb's house. To give him proof? But she had scorned to give him proof. She had told him she wouldn't marry him unless he really wanted to marry her, unless he loved her. Why should she have thought of proof? He had believed her without. She had no reason on earth for being where she was—miles from home on a January morning with her work undone, her clothes a mess; and she didn't know a soul in the house before which she sat. Except Herb . . . and Herb had poked her away and away with letters. Her being there was the most senseless thing on earth. It was almost funny. It *was* funny. . . .

Then, not because she had made a decision, nor because she saw clearly what she was going to say, but because she did not know and because she could no longer

bear to look at the fact, she got up and walked stiffly toward the house.

The bell, when she pushed it, rang coldly and distantly inside. She waited. Steps. Whose?

A woman opened the door. Not Herb's mother.

"Does Herb . . . Herbert Shuman live here?"

The woman eyed her up and down. "This is where he lives when he's home," she answered.

"Oh, isn't he home?"

"He's in California this winter, with his ma."

"Oh . . . California. Yes . . . I knew he was going. I didn't know he'd gone yet."

"Yeh, he went before Christmas, about the second week in December it was."

"When'll he be back? Soon? I just wanted to see him a minute. I was going through town and just thought I'd drop out. I—"

"Well, he's gone. Only Mr. Shuman is here now."

"Mr. Shuman? Oh, I see. All right. I'm sorry to bother you."

As Arlie stepped back the woman opened the door wider and came out. "Got a car or buggy out there?" she demanded. "I don't see none. You didn't walk, did you? You must of though, with that coat."

"I fell, you see. . . . Down behind the evergreens, I got . . ." She let the phrase dangle, hoping the woman would infer that her buggy was behind the trees, and not that she had fallen there. "You're the hired girl, are you?" she parried.

"I'm the housekeeper," the other returned, coldly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought maybe—"

"Mrs. Gardewine . . . Mrs. Gardewine . . . close the door, can't you?" The heavily-toned words came from the interior of the house, and then, nearer and louder: "Who's out there, anyway? Any one to see me? Why didn't you ask them to come in?" With the last words a

man stood in the middle of the big doorway, and Arlie, one foot on the first step, turned to look at him. He was dark, of medium build, with blue eyes that looked steadily at her—too steadily. His mustache was a bristly black, touched lightly with gray, and as aggressive as the chin.

"It's some one to see Herbert," Mrs. Gardewine said. Arlie shifted her eyes.

"You want to see Herbert, eh?" The voice was no longer irritable, but not kind. "Herbert's in California."

"Yes, that's what she said." Arlie nodded at Mrs. Gardewine. "I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Shuman." She was at the bottom of the steps now. "I'll be going back."

"She walked out," said Mrs. Gardewine. "Just look at her coat."

"Oh, that don't matter," Arlie laughed. "I'm used to that."

"You say you *walked* out here?" Mr. Shuman inquired incredulously, advancing to the top of the step to look at her closely.

"*She* said it," Arlie replied; "I didn't, but it's true; I did. I didn't know it was so muddy when I started."

"But my girl," said Mr. Shuman, "you can't walk back. Look at your feet. They're soaked. You'll catch your death of cold."

"Oh no! I'm used to this. I do all sorts of tramping."

But Mr. Shuman had her by the arm and was pulling her up the steps into the house, where he told Mrs. Gardewine to take care of her. In the kitchen Mrs. Gardewine soon had her warming her feet by the register, with her shoes and stockings drying by the stove. Then she insisted that Arlie remove her skirt and petticoat, put on an old wrapper, and be comfortable.

"Oh no!" Arlie responded. "I'd rather dry them just

like this. They're not very wet, really, and the heat just *pours* up here, and I can get 'em dry in just no time." She pulled her skirt lower, enclosing the register, partly to dry the skirt and partly to conceal from Mrs. Gardewine the soaked and frayed edges of her underwear. Besides, a change might involve a supervisory eye.

Then, while Mrs. Gardewine returned to the preparation of the meal, Arlie looked about the kitchen. It was immaculate—from the snowy cabinet by her side to the large porcelain sink, fluff of tea-towels on the wooden fingers above and the white table beyond. Even the enormous range shone in clean black splendor, and the light from the wide windows fell freshly on the blue and white linoleum. It was far more costly than the combined best of the Gelston household; and it was the place where Herb had been, where Mrs. Shuman—tall, imperial, dark—gave orders. "Yet what right," Arlie asked herself, "have *I* here if Herb don't want to marry me? If he does, all right, but if he don't . . ." That contingency she did not examine: the rushing warmth that caressed and billowed about her was too drowsy, too good. . . . If she weren't careful she'd be asleep. Then the cold within and the encompassing heat sent through her what was at once a shiver of cold and a pulsation of delight.

Mrs. Gardewine returned after a short absence. "Mr. Shuman says you're to have lunch with him as soon as your things are dry. Then he's going to drive you in to town. . . . He says," she added, and spoke as if it were her own thought too, "that he can't for the life of him see why you'd walk all the way out here on a day like this. . . . You musta wanted to see Herbert pretty bad." She was glancing at her sidewise.

It was hard to struggle through the warmth in which she so ponderously lay to shake off such a suggestion:

"Oh no . . . I didn't want to see him as bad as that. I just thought I'd run out. . . ."

"Run out? Humph! On a day like this!"

"N—no, I didn't mean just that. You see, I didn't know it was so far. Some one told me it was just over the hill, just at the edge of town."

"It's three miles and a quarter from the depot to the front gate."

"I thought it was thirty before I got here. But you know how it is: after I'd gone so far it seemed easier to go on than turn back."

"Well, maybe, though I bet I'd of gone back. . . . How'd you happen to be in town?"

At this Arlie contemplated her billowing skirt. "In town?" she repeated. "Oh—I was doing some business for Mr. Tritchler—down at Coon Falls. He owns the Bijou there, you know, and wanted me to come up and see about something for him."

"Who'd you see, here?"

"It was, it was . . . well, you know I've forgotten the name already. I think it's the man who owns the picture show, though."

"We ain't got no picture show in Lawson," said Mrs. Gardewine.

"You *haven't!* Why, why of all things. . . . But then, of course. I guess it was just about starting a picture show that my trip was about. I just had to—had to give the man some papers and get some from him. . . . It must be awful slow not to have a picture show here. . . . Don't you find it sorta slow?"

Mrs. Gardewine's replies were not consoling, for the lunch was nearly ready. "I guess your stockings are dry now," she said, in the midst of her preparations, as she felt them and tossed them over. "Put 'em on, and some slippers in the entry there, and come on in to lunch."

Briefly Arlie rehearsed the vague stories she had given

Mrs. Gardewine, that she might give a connected account if Mr. Shuman questioned her, and one that would tally with what she had already told.

She felt out of place in the dining-room with its blue rug, polished floor, and dulled massive table spread with doilies, gleaming with silver and glass, and touched brightly with the color of china. Mr. Shuman, she noticed before they sat down, was inclined to be stout, and he looked, she reflected, much more like a banker than like a farmer.

"I'm not sure I caught your name," he said to her, and Arlie searched the matter-of-fact tones for kindness, finding none.

"I don't think I told you," she answered, "but it's Gelston, Arlie Gelston. I live at Coon Falls."

"Oh yes, Miss Gelston. I think I've heard of you before."

And then, as he served her plate, he took from her, a little more smoothly, the same misinformation she had given Mrs. Gardewine. This time, however, Arlie was prompter, and did not wait to be questioned on all particulars, hoping as she offered them that the fact she *was* offering them would in a measure make them seem the truth. She spoke, too, of a deed; of how funny Gran'pa Trichler was, not trusting the mails and all; and by much laughing succeeded in not being hurt by the look of scepticism that did not wholly leave Mr. Shuman's face.

"You'd have saved yourself a lot of trouble, Miss Gelston," he said finally, "if you'd called up before you left town." Arlie was beginning to dislike the blue eyes that changed neither color nor expression as they looked persistently into hers. She felt very soft and young beneath that blue inquiry. It bothered her to meet both his eyes—they were so far apart. She looked at her plate.

"Yes," he repeated, "a call might have saved a good deal of work."

"I didn't think of 'phoning at all," she answered meekly. "I don't know why." And, after a pause, repeated, "But you know, I thought it was just a little way at first, just at the edge of town practically."

Mr. Shuman smiled. "Who told you that?"

"The man at the depot, it was."

"I see."

They ate.

"You don't have a farmhouse here, do you? It's more like a city place. If you didn't look out the window you'd think it was somebody's in town."

"Yes. . . . You knew Herbert pretty well, did you?"

"Oh yes! He used to come to take me for rides last summer. Real often. He was awfully nice."

"And so you thought, since you were in town, that you'd just drop in to see him, eh?"

He was pressing her too closely. What could he suspect? Surely he couldn't know—he had never seen her before. And yet, it *was* kind of crazy to come suddenly on a person, as she had, and with stories that confused more than they explained, and required indefinite series of props.

"Yes, that's it," she answered; and then said: "It was all right, wasn't it, my coming out? I mean, it was polite—maybe?"

Mr. Shuman intently pursued a piece of scalloped potato with his fork, and made no answer.

"Well?" Arlie persisted.

"Why . . . yes . . . certainly. That was all right. Of course." Little more was said until the meal was finished. Then he pushed back his chair. "I'll have the carriage brought around now and we'll drive in."

"Oh, don't drive in just to take me. I can walk all right. Honest I can."

"Of course you can't. I was going in later anyway. Mr. Gardewine's bringing the team now. You'd better get your things from Mrs. Gardewine. I'll be ready to go in about twenty minutes."

As she left the room Arlie felt his eyes upon her back, and she did not leave the kitchen until her hat was on and the coat firmly buttoned down its entire length.

On the ride to Lawson their talk was strained, for Arlie was then clearly conscious that her account had not satisfied Mr. Shuman, and his silence was a sign to her that he was willing to let her know, in that way, what he was thinking. Elaborately she evaded further mention of her walk, skirting danger as she inquired about Herb and hoped that Mrs. Shuman was getting better. He answered curtly, drew on his strong cigar, and urged the horses on. His finely gloved hands held the reins firmly; there was something of Herb—though uncouthly and largely like—in his movements, and particularly in the silence which held his displeasure as a prickly surface. But for the first mile Arlie had chattered amiably, glad she was escaping so easily, after all. At the crossroads, when she realized that he was too heavy to move into response, she sank into silence.

At the station Mr. Shuman descended stiffly and turned to help her out. That was polite, she thought, and like Herb in some of his moments. But not at all like Herb was what he did next.

"I think," he said, "that I'll just go in and tell that agent exactly how far out my place is. You said it was the station agent who told you it was just on the edge of town, didn't you?"

Arlie, who had started to thank him for the ride, stopped. "Why yes, but—"

"You see," he went on, his eyes heavily upon her, and his solid form in the fur overcoat bulking large and powerful, "you see, I don't want any one else misdirected as you were."

"Oh no," Arlie cried, "you mustn't ask him. You *mustn't!* He wouldn't remember. . . . I don't think it's the same man in there now, anyway. I . . ." She stopped. His face held satisfaction, and he was making no move either to hitch the team or to go to the station.

"All right," he said, and climbed into his seat. "I guess you know best."

"I want . . . to thank you, Mr. Shuman," she stammered after him as he settled himself beneath the dark robes, "for bringing me in. It was awfully good of you."

He grunted, set his lips tightly about his cigar, and drove off. From the wheels mud dropped wetly into the mire, and the body of the carriage held a bark of mud.

6

The connection at Shelley Junction on the return trip was a close one, and by four-thirty Arlie was back in Coon Falls. She dropped from the end of the train to go around the back of the station lest her father see her. As she plodded on to the Bijou to do her belated cleaning she was experiencing a chagrin more painfully searching than any she had known. She had leapt so unsuspectingly into the trap Mr. Shuman had laid for her at the last that she writhed under the memory. Now he knew she had lied, that she had known all the time how far it was to the farm, and had nevertheless walked those miserable miles. And if he knew that much, those eyes of his would see disastrously through the flimsy stories she had told. Just what was a deed, anyway? And if he saw that much he might know that she

had come all the way from Coon Falls to Lawson to see Herb. But what would he think of it, and what would he feel toward her? And if he guessed the truth, what would he feel toward his son?

In the rounding swiftness of this she could make out only that it was highly probable Herb would hear of her, and if Herb knew—would he act? And how?

The inner din deafened her to the words Tritchler threw at her. Even Somers's words were cold, but all of a piece with the day. The work had never seemed so hard, and not the easiest of it was the thought of the fight she must wage with her mother when at last she reached home. More stories to think up. But maybe she could get her mother to fighting with her father.

CHAPTER X

WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

I

BEFORE she left the Bijou, Arlie drew Somers aside. "I want you to help me a little," she said.

"Sure. . . ." He looked at her with waiting eyes over his cigarette smoke; and unsteady with fatigue she lost continuing words for a moment to be absorbed into that look.

"I . . . I had to go up to—to a town today. That's why I was late. And I don't want ma to know. So would you back me if I told her you sent me up to Whitestone to—oh, I don't know—get some films, maybe?"

"Always glad to tell a little fib for a friend," he answered. "She called up, your mother did, about one-thirty. Tritchler answered. Said you hadn't been here, I guess. But he needn't of knew I sent you, see? . . . Sure, that's all right. Only let us know next time you go on one of these joy-rides."

"Thanks . . . awfully." She went slowly out the door and home.

2

"Well then, call Somers up if you don't believe me, ma," she was saying half an hour later. But she had

carefully produced this only after a seeming reluctance to have her mother telephone. If she told her at once to telephone, she had reasoned, her mother would suspect an agreement of some kind.

"Huh!" said Mrs. Gelston.

It had worked.

3

Oddly, in the days that followed, Arlie suffered more from the thought of what Mr. Shuman would be thinking of her than she did from the burning images of days to come. To the future she was suddenly returned one morning when by mistake she had turned down Main Street instead of taking the usual side street. Mrs. Nolte's eyes fastened on her waist—a poking inquiry of pig-brown eyes—and then their separate directions took them on; but in the soft dark angle of a store window she saw reflected Mrs. Nolte's head turned over her shoulder. Arlie fled down the block unseeing, and at the next corner turned back home.

"Forgot my handkerchief," she called to her mother, and safe in her room tried to draw her corset tighter; but when it was tighter she could breathe only with abrupt difficulty. "I can't do it," and she loosened the strings. "It'll have to be," she murmured. As if in gratitude the child within her stirred. She wanted to cry.

From then on she dreaded the work in the morning more than at night, for in the glare of snowy daylight she had to pass . . . people. Each was a separately painful encounter. As she approached a person, especially a woman, her whole thought would be: "Will she notice?" In every glance she found a leer, and in every greeting a cold, gleeful triumph. In stiller, more rational moments she convinced herself that no one really knew. If they did, Tritchler would fire her. At worst a few might suspect.

Her lethargic contentment, however, had passed. It was as if the barrier she had erected against heathenish insinuations was about to dissolve out of existence. Shortly now she would be alone. Already she could hear the sound of voices, thick with rich matter. The venomous forms were no longer high and ethereally green and painful, but on the ground about her, advancing.

4

All people were dangerous; they existed. But they held all comfort with themselves. The more she feared them the more she wanted what, when they were together, she had discovered they gave. On Sunday night she went to the revival meetings, hoping Miss Haggerty would not be there.

The church was already filled when she arrived, and they were just beginning the first hymn. Behind the screen of backs she was ushered to a seat by Ray Jarvis. He frowned at her as she slipped into the pew. "Maybe it's because I'm late," she thought, and settled her coat collar farther back.

With the rapping of a baton on the pulpit a little man on the platform stopped the singing. Wisps of hay-colored hair tossed on his big bald head. "Now, now," he said, "let's have that verse again. Let's make this old church tremble. Come on now!" Pacing the platform as he waved at them he led them into:

"Count your many blessings, count them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done."

Grouped in a semicircle behind the song leader the ministers opened their mouths, from which no sounds seemed to issue. They looked a little foolish, Arlie thought, and flat-faced and sleek beside the evangelist,

Reverend Murkleman, whom she recognized from the placards in the store windows. He was a lank, cadaverous man with narrow forehead and great jaw. Sitting in the central chair he clasped his hands tightly and kept his intense eyes on the foot of the pulpit. It was plain to all that he was receiving from an inner—an outer?—source, direct and articulate inspiration. Power would issue from that man. . . .

Belle was in the choir, her yellow hair fluffier than ever, and her teeth flashing. Beside her stood Edna Dexter, then Angie Garfield, Althea Holcomb . . . almost all the high school girls.

"Here, here!" The song leader rapped again for silence. "You folks know what the Good Book says: 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord.' Now that's put there for the benefit of you that can't sing. If you *can't* sing, why make a noise anyway."

The congregation stirred, the ministers beamed. But the Reverend Murkleman roused from his withdrawn contemplation only to smile, wanly. He had heard it before.

And then they sang, Arlie with them. "That's it! Keep it up, you're doing fine!" the song leader shouted, and waved his baton more decisively than ever. Commonalty flowed in almost palpable currents, and Arlie, long isolated, felt herself borne away from trouble toward some dark ancient home she had forgotten but was beginning to remember. She forgot those around her and sang herself toward that home. When her section was slow with its verse as the others waited to join in at the chorus, her voice was unhesitant and clear above the subdued accompaniment of those near her. She did not recognize the blurred faces turning to look. The singing stopped. She sat down perspiring, and, before she remembered, started to take off her coat.

Hastily she returned it to its place. The Reverend

Pingrey was praying, with a voice that soared above his usual cadences only to fall into them at the end of a sentence. The evangelist had dropped upon his knees before his chair, as, tardily, did the Reverend Foster and Reverend Burpee. Many of the congregation had leaned their heads upon the backs of the pews. Funny . . . she hadn't seen them do that before. Then she was doing it herself, though the position cost her an uncomfortable shortening of breath. The prayer drowsed over her. Surreptitiously she slipped her hand into the pocket of her coat to find a dime for the collection.

Comfortable again after the collection she listened with foreboding eagerness to the text, which, after a lanky shake and pause for silence—caught in its trough of diminuendo—the Reverend Murkleman announced: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." He paced the platform while the girls of the choir settled themselves and the organist, after arranging her music on the rack, slipped into an inconspicuous seat. The ministers dropped into new attitudes of comfort.

"All ye that labor and are heavy laden . . ." Reverend Murkleman reiterated.

"Isn't his voice a little hoarse?" some one murmured.

"He's been preaching so much. Such a *strain*!" came the answer.

The Reverend Murkleman was running his bony fingers through his hair, already in confusion. "Come unto me, and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light. We want to remember, folks, that Christ wasn't speaking of an actual yoke, like your fathers and grandfathers used to drive oxen with in Iowa fifty or seventy-five years ago. That's what Professor Budlong would call a figure of speech. Isn't it, Professor?" Murkleman pointed a long finger at Professor Budlong's top-heavy head, protruding above his neighbors. All eyes

followed the finger to see Professor Budlong's confirming nod.

"That's right—a figure of speech. And what Jesus Christ meant by that was just this: that any one of you that's sunk so far down into the fleshpots of Egypt or Coon Falls—for you got 'em here too, I know what I'm talking about—why, all you got to do is to climb out of the mire that's sucking you deeper and deeper, and get on the old road once more and pull a little; and after a while you won't feel the yoke galling your neck quite so much as you expected it to. No sir!" And he jerked himself to the other side of the platform to crouch with outstretched arm and, after a dramatic hush, to ask in a terrifying whisper: "Why?" Another jerk of his head, and his hair described a short black arc. "I'll tell you why." The "why" was again prolonged and terrifying. Arlie was nervous. Then, in stentorian tone: "It's because Jesus Christ Himself is pulling in the other half of that yoke. *He*'s the other member of the team. *He*'s pulling right along with *you*. He's carrying His share of the load. That's why He calls it '*my* yoke.' 'Because *my* yoke is easy.' Easy, because *He*'s pulling with you, and because the burden you pull is one that two are pulling. *That's* why." The "why" uncoiled itself and shot smoothly, keenly out, snakewise.

"Now all you business men who think you're going to shake your wings in the next world because you can crank a car in this one; or you farmers that think because the corn you raise is tall and big and goes eighty bushels to the acre, and you think you're going to ride into Heaven on the back of a Poland China hog—I tell you you're not. Not unless you got Christ behind the counter with you, or Christ along with you when you plow. No sir! And you housewives who get irritable and het up over your work and nag at your husbands because you can't have a new Wilton rug—I tell you when you got

Christ washing the dishes with you, the water's too good for angels to drink of. And the reason so many of you fret your lives away is that you ain't got any *religion* in you.

"What's the matter with the young folks? Why are *they* going to hell as fast as they can get there? Because they got no more thought of *Christ* in their lives than they have of the first King of China.

"Why, I remember a young girl brought up in the finest Christian home it was ever my fortune to enter. A fine old father she had, and a mother who was the most sainted woman I ever met—except my wife. Never a day dawned but they didn't read their chapter out of the Book of Books, and never a meal was eaten in *that* house without thanks to the Lord that out of His abundance had provided it. Why, everything there was fine and generous and Christian, and the girl was sent away to college, to a university, and had plenty to spend, too, while she was getting her diploma. And when she got it, her dear old father and mother gave her a trip to Europe. Went abroad, yes sir. Everything a girl could possibly ask. And yet . . . and yet . . . when I saw that girl the last time it was in a cell in the Cook County Jail in Chicago, where she'd been put for *forgery*, and where she'd ought to been put long before she was, for sins I'm not going to talk about tonight.

"Why was she there?

"Because she let *Christ* out of her life and the Devil in. Because she wasn't content with the old-fashioned ox yoke and instead of pulling had to be pulled, and driven around the country by a lot of gay young bucks who'd ought to been horse whipped. Because she wasn't content to have *Christ* in her life, working along with her. No sir! Because she thought *His* yoke too galling and the burden too much to bear.

"Friends"—he lowered his voice to a hush of whisper

—“friends, I’ll tell you one thing: The yoke and the burden Christ puts on you are the loveliest, easiest things you’re going to find in *this* world. And if you don’t find ‘em in this world, God help you in the next, for He’s the only one who can.”

The Reverend Murkleman paused to drink before resuming.

“Two years ago this morning, at six-thirty, just as the dawn was beginning to break, I stood on a little platform not so big as the one I’m standing on now. There was a trapdoor cut in that platform, and on it stood a young man with his hands tied behind his back, a black cap on his head, and a noose around his neck, waiting for that door to fall. Yet five years before I’d of bet every penny I possessed that that same young man would go far, that he would do great things, great things for himself, for the world, and for the Lord. And that young man said to me before they led him out that morning, ‘O my God, Murkleman, don’t let them forget Jesus Christ! *I* forgot him, and here I am.’

“*Tell them not to forget Jesus Christ! . . .’*”

Murkleman’s twisted face glared passionately at them from the swaying end of his bent body. “And yet you tell me that His yoke is too hard for your poor feeble necks and His burden too heavy for your poor feeble backs. They’ll be feeble, God knows, after the load the Devil’s going to lay on ‘em.”

Arlie saw only the roused lean face, colored with the strain of his intense effort. Hands pressed together, head bent forward, she silently labored with him, living through, as in an instant’s microcosm, the lives he chronicled. They had gone out, those lives, all out into Christless horror.

When had she ever thought of these things before? She had treated Sunday School, when her mother had spasmodically made her go, as a joke, a bore. She had

seldom gone to church. Her Bible—where was it? And the yoke of Christ *was* easy, *so* easy; and she was in a mire worse than any he had named. Where was she going? Where, after all the years of her life, fading into deeper horror, would she end? She lifted her eyes suddenly to the great sign across the front of the church, which asked in red letters: Where Will You Spend Eternity? Was hell even now opening to receive her into its violent heart? He hadn't spoken of hell, but she knew . . . she knew. . . . And the baby within her, what of it? She would be giving it nothing, nothing. Herb, too, she must win over to Christ, for in Christ alone could they find forgiveness. Or could *she* find it there alone? Herb must look to himself, out in California. He would not be thinking of Christ now, Herb wouldn't . . . Then his face, keen and brown, with eyes that dreamed at her—he was as clear as if she saw him across the road in sunlight, with California sunlight metallically brilliant on every contour of his face. . . .

"'Come unto me, and I will give you rest.' Rest from the sins that hold your feet and clog your heart. Aren't you going to give Him a chance, now, *now*, before it's too late, and your last chance is gone? Christ forgives and forgives—seventy times seven—but I want to tell you that you can wear out the patience of the Lord God of Hosts. *He* isn't so patient as His Son, and when He strikes, He strikes suddenly. And oh! the bliss of the rest He would give to you, out of his boundless compassionate heart would give to the worst of you, *will* give to you in the next five minutes if only *you* will . . .

"A little music there, Miss Organist."

The song leader appeared with his baton; his voice was hushed and solemn now. "One sixty-seven," he announced, and the choir softly leading, the congregation joined in singing, "Why not say Yes tonight, why not say Yes?"

The evangelist stretched forth his hands: "Aren't you coming?" he pleaded. "Aren't you coming now? Now? Are you going to be deaf forever to the only voice that calls to you across the whole wide world to lift yourself out of the muck and into the great and the perfect rest that He alone can give you? Just be remembering that *He'll* be pulling with you, right in the same yoke, and His burden is the lightest one of all for you who are heavy laden now with the weight of your sin and your shame."

Subdued stir of people. Strain of expectancy. Across the aisle: Mrs. Nolte with her arm around her eleven-year-old son as gray-haired Mrs. Holcomb pleaded. The boy's serious face was perplexed as his mother cried, silently, into her handkerchief. . . . Some one rising to whisper in the ear of one in front of him. Dullness of coming tears, and all converging to a smooth surface of desire. Breakage! Some one—Ben Medberry—was going forward. . . . There was some one else. . . . And Willie Nolte, gently assisted to the aisle, was moving slowly pulpitward, looking back at his mother, who still wept.

Murkleman's long arm was extended in a great hand-shaking with Ben Medberry. And they were singing, all of them:

"Just as I am, without one plea,
Save that His blood was shed for me. . . ."

Weeping around her, behind her . . . and very slowly, with clumsy slowness, her hands finding the ends of the pews for guidance, her coat thrown back, her handkerchief seeking her eyes, Arlie was going down the aisle, crying softly as they sang.

The journey lengthened itself out. It was far. Heads and heads, and inquiring white faces to be passed and

more faces turning. Then out upon the carpeted opening before the platform, which, after incredible time, she reached. He gave her hand but a fillip, as he turned to exhort more. Conscious of a hitch, but not knowing just what, she found the bench on which sat nine or ten others, and tried to control her weeping. In a moment the Reverend Pingrey was at her side. Did she understand the great step she was taking? Did she know what it meant—going to church, constant prayer, taking a Sunday School class, if there was need?

"I'd be glad to . . . do anything you want me . . . if only you'd *let* me," she sobbed. Didn't he know, or did he? He must, but they were one with Christ now, and he was helping her by giving her a task.

"My dear girl, of course we'll let you," he was saying. "We'll *want* you to." Wagging near her his head with its scanty reddish-gray hair and wrinkled nose, he produced a card and pencil. "Just fill it out, Arlie. I suppose your church preference will be Presbyterian, of course." She nodded.

"There now." He took the card. "Reverend Murklemann wants to offer prayer. We'll all kneel together."

Shutting out the blare of light and sinking into the warm darkness of her own arms, she listened to the opening of the prayer—"Those looking for the first time on the white face of the Savior, come now to His arms for rest, and to accept His yoke for all eternity. . . ."

More she did not hear, for she was trying to dislodge from the still sunlit height of distance the calm face of Herb, and substitute for it the white face of Jesus Christ. The effort collapsed everything, and she saw only the weird colors on her own closed eyelids, and knew only the puffy breathing of Reverend Pingrey, kneeling beside her; then lapsed away. . . . She was swung through a drone of darkness, and was rushed dizzyingly from pole to pole of Christ's face, calm and

growing severe, and Herb's as he had bent over the side of the car so long ago to say good-bye. Helpless, she was spun between them, reaching neither, sinking from both—

They were getting up. The prayer was over. She was on her feet, beset by a long line of people pressing on to shake her hand and the hands of the dozen others on the bench. The Reverend Murkleman was talking unconcernedly with the song leader, who was putting on his overcoat. The line thinned out, broke into groups of two and three, and Arlie started up the aisle toward the door, where several men in overcoats were standing.

"Oh, wait a minute, Arlie." Mrs. Holcomb came up behind. "I didn't get a chance to congratulate you. On taking the step. It was fine of you. For I been a little afraid, Arlie, lately, that you were forgetting the Savior." A hush came into her voice as she mentioned the Name, and she put an arm around Arlie.

"I wanted to do what was right, Mrs. Holcomb. I ain't been very good, I guess. But I'm going to be. I know I can be better now. . . . Isn't he fine?"

Mrs. Holcomb was not quite sure to whom the "he" referred. "Oh, Reverend Murkleman, you mean?" she asked, slowing their walk down to a crawl. "Yes, he certainly is. Fine and noble. I fairly worship him. We all do, for that matter. And I'm so glad about little Willie Nolte. He's been giving his mother so *much* trouble. Smoking and swearing. But he took the step tonight." She sighed. "I was coming over to you next, Arlie, after I worked with him. Only you'd already gone forward when I got around to it. It's better that way, I suppose, to go of your own vol—because you want to go, you know." Her arm encircled Arlie more firmly, and Arlie felt loved, protected. She leaned a little closer; she was tired now. And how fine and straight Mrs. Holcomb was, after

all. Her gray hair was like silver wire, fuzzy and white. Then she felt the arm about her waist—the arm had moved and she turned frightened eyes to look into Mrs. Holcomb's, which, behind her glasses, had the faraway, abstracted look of one who is feeling in a bag for a particular article.

Arlie tore from her side the inquiring hand, walked quickly through the black swinging-doors, down the slippery steps, across the street under the arclight, and plunged into the shadows beyond. Then, in panic and sobbing anger, she ran.

5

Her mother was sitting in the dining-room, reading the remnants of the Sunday paper. Panting, Arlie dropped into a chair opposite her. An old impulse to bare her troubles to her mother, long years in abeyance now, broke to the surface. She wanted consolation, indignant words about Mrs. Holcomb, promise of reprimand, and belief in its efficacy.

"Why Arlie, what's the matter with you?" Mrs. Gelston raised widened eyes from her paper. "You're red as a beet. What's the matter with you? And panting like a dog. Now don't cry. . . . Here, take mine." Arlie dabbed at her eyes with her mother's handkerchief.

"It's that Mrs. Holcomb," she choked.

"Mrs. Holcomb? What's she done now?"

"She ain't *done* nothing, except to . . . to insult me. That's what she done. At church." She was telling a dangerous too much, but could not restrain herself.

"Well, what?" Mrs. Gelston had laid down her paper to look her demand at her daughter, whose face was almost hidden under her hat as she picked with a fork at the Sunday tablecloth. "Don't do that," her mother said. "Want to pick a hole in it?"

Arlie laid the fork aside. It had been a mistake not to go directly to her room. How could she get out of it now? "She said that I hadn't been good, that I was too wild . . . that . . ."

"Huh! I don't see what there is in that to make you blubber. Though I will say she'd do well to watch her own brats a little more."

"Yes, and I told her as much."

Mrs. Gelston's eyes gleamed. "You did, honest?" Arlie nodded. "Well, good for you, that's all *I* got to say! . . . Take your coat off, it's too hot in here. I hate to see the ugly old thing anyway. . . . Take it off," she added, as Arlie sat motionless.

"All right." She slipped it off, exposing her rather soiled middy.

"Was there many there?"

"Packed. I could hardly get a seat."

"How many got converted tonight? . . . I heard Mrs. Lowrey saying this man Murkleman wasn't saving as many souls per sermon as *her* husband used to. But then she *would* say that. Said he converted sixty-five one night, and I guess this fellow ain't got above thirty all told. There wasn't *none* the night I went, and only two the night before. How many you say there was to-night?"

"You didn't give me a chance to say, but there was about a dozen."

"A dozen. Huh! Wish I'd been there. Just my luck to miss the big night. Who was they?" Mrs. Gelston gathered cake crumbs from the table, on which Arlie's hands were nervously clasped.

"Well, I was one of 'em."

The crumbs were arrested a foot from the mouth open to receive them; the arm fell gradually back, but the mouth staid open. At that, through her confusion, Arlie began to laugh. The mouth went shut.

"You!" And then, as if in revenge for the bitter mirth Arlie had suppressed too late, Mrs. Gelston threw back her great round yellow head, opened her mouth, and laughed as Arlie had never heard her before. The head rolled forward and rolled back, as if it were gargling an immense liquid and throwing invisible fountains at the ceiling. It became the sole focus of Arlie's vision, seen at the end of a whirling funnel of darkness, a yellow-white distortion that was crackling under the light and then expanding dizzily, with the table elevated again into the place of light only to be absorbed in the spread of the face. Sound, harshly thunderous, as of ponderous wheels grinding composed the all of existence beneath whose weight she struggled, against omnipotent onset of light and sound, held to the breast of extinction. She wanted to call her mother. She could not speak. Beneath the click of the perpetual round of the whole world become hostile she could not move a finger. Final defeat. Her very self beaten into formlessness . . . yet still she grayly lived . . . lifting . . . dizzy world steadyng. Steady a moment. Lifted out of the depths . . . brightness again, and voices dimming . . . corner of the table, ceiling below her . . . toward it she was falling.

Her mother's face, eyes wide with terror, bent over her. She herself was rasping as she breathed. She was on the floor, gazing dully at her mother. A mopping on her forehead . . . cold wet.

"Arlie, Arlie, are you all right? Tell me."

Arlie stared and nodded. A white some one in the doorway . . . her father, in his nightgown. Another effort: he was holding a basin of water, the blue and white basin.

"Can you get up now?"

She shook her head and fell away into blankness, aware

only that she breathed, and then her father was lifting her to a chair.

"Give me d—water," she murmured. A hand advanced a glass. She drank cold vitality. "I guess I fainted, sort of."

"You sure did, girl. Are you all right now?" It was her father, a kindly tone. "Just sit there. Then I'll help you up to bed. You're wore out."

"My God," her mother was saying as she returned to the kitchen door wiping her hands on a towel. "My God, I thought you was dead. Just screamed and flopped over like, right off the chair. Said she got religion, Oliver, at the revival meeting."

"Did you, Arlie?" her father inquired, and to her nod said, "Good for you."

That gave her strength. "I guess I'm ready to go up, pa." He grasped her arm and helped her up the stairs, Mrs. Gelston following.

The bed brought stupor, black and inert, from which she wakened to find herself in her nightgown between the sheets. Her mother was sitting by the bed, shadowily bulky in a blanket against the dim light from the hall.

"Are you awake, Arlie?"

"Yes, ma."

"Arlie," Mrs. Gelston bent forward with a whisper. "Arlie Gelston, are you going to have a baby? Now don't you lie to me."

She looked at her mother with darkened hueless eyes that were aware now of all that had happened, eyes that were so unbearably aware that when she answered "Yes" Mrs. Gelston could avoid them only by bursting into tears. Back and forth she rocked, as not long before she had laughed, and gave out a muted cry, "My God, my God." For minutes Arlie continued to look at her, but when the rocking and the sobs and the low cries did not

cease, she turned on her side. Nor to the long out-pour of abuse that followed did she return any answer.

6

It must have been one o'clock before Mrs. Gelston left the room, hoping that "your father don't know yet," and saying Arlie could tell him herself. Throughout the hours Arlie had not said a word, despite the shakings ending in a slap that her mother had given. When the door closed Arlie turned back and reworked the names her mother had used. Her child was to be a bastard. She herself was no better than a prostitute. She—who that night had vowed herself a Christian, and on whom the still face of Christ had shone, receiving her into a rest that, in this collapse of all that had been ordered in her life, had not begun. Before, her life *had* been ordered: her work, at home and at the Bijou, her passages with her mother, her quarrels with Phil, her memory of Herb, and too often the fear, to which she had become reconciled. Already much of what she had feared had become real. She had the substance now, not the foreshadowing. But she had become so deeply used to shadows.

She was not going to be at home, now, in her own life. That was all she felt, and was what, in thick, slow movements, she thought. Yet as the thin, wasted hours of the night passed it was almost as if she had lost order in the forms of life around her to find it within herself; and there it was moving into a music, and becoming a quiet of its own. White music, dim music, torn from confusion and growing within her: quiet of stars above the wind and the answer of restless trees; though all was magically stilled.

Was this conversion? No. Christ had gone out in the night. This, she had found herself.

When she awakened at last to the gray wash of light in her room, she saw by the slim banks against the windows that it had been snowing. Downstairs a stir began which seemed, by a mutual consent, to leave her out. There followed two or three uninterrupted hours, during which her father and brother departed, and only the lonely clatter of her mother reached her ears. When she went down, carrying her clothes with her to dress by the kitchen fire, she was surprised to find that the wash water was not on.

"Aren't you going to wash today, ma?" she asked, knowing that her words were the first of long hours of words. Her mother did not answer. "It seems to me we'd better. It just means we have to tomorrow if we don't."

Mrs. Gelston continued to gather dishes, grimly.

"I don't see that you need to be so . . ." Arlie's voice lapsed into herself.

"So what?" her mother jerked out.

"Nothing. I guess you got a right to do anything you want."

Mrs. Gelston sniffed, and then came silence; but at last: "Now listen to me, Arlie. You wouldn't say a word last night, but is Herb Shuman the father of that baby?"

"You know he is, ma." Quietly. "I never went with anybody else."

"Is he still in California?"

"Yes."

"Did he ever talk about marrying you?"

"Only when I made him."

"Ain't he going to?"

"I don't know. Not unless he wants to, I guess."

"Not unless he *wants* to. Huh, we'll see about that."

"But I wouldn't *let* him unless he wanted to. I come too far, ma."

Mrs. Gelston sat down, a look of vague pain stiffening her face. "Your pa's going to have something to say about that."

Then quickly: "Have you told pa yet?"

"I didn't dare to. He'd—he'd just go crazy. You don't know your pa."

Didn't she? As Arlie pondered, Mrs. Gelston dropped her head in her arms on the kitchen table, to sob softly, then wildly. Arlie went to her side and stood there helplessly. "Don't cry, ma. I'm sorry. I can't help it now, you know." Her mother's outflung arm swept her back. The sobbing stopped.

"I know you can't, I know you can't, little bitch that you are. Giving yourself to every—oh, you fool! You *fool!* To have a daughter who'd—who'd do what you done!"

Arlie moved to the window, where unseeingly she looked on the hard width of white. "I'm not a bitch, ma," she said when her mother's renewed sobs had died away. "I'm Arlie Gelston, and not anything else. Maybe I have done wrong. I know I have, but—" Her meaning seemed to fly out the window, to be received into the hard identity of the winter. How could she tell her mother of what she had heard within herself in the night?

"Yes, you're Arlie Gelston, you are. Stand there fat as a hog, will you? . . . I musta been blind not to see it long ago."

"No, I just didn't put my corset on this morning. That's all."

"I'd like to turn you out. And I don't know but what your pa will when I tell him."

"Oh no you won't. You couldn't have me to hell around if you did."

Mrs. Gelston began afresh with her invective, which passed over Arlie because it was too blunt to find her. During a lull Arlie telephoned to Somers that she was sick, couldn't work, and might not be able to return at all.

A little before eleven Mrs. Gelston sent her upstairs to her room, for they had seen Mrs. Horack floundering through the snow to the house. "Now what takes her out on a morning like this?" Mrs. Gelston had wondered, and then, understanding: "She's just the first of a string of 'em."

Since it was too cold in the upstairs room to stay out of bed Arlie tucked herself between the blankets and listened. With guttural greetings and a heavy stamping of feet Mrs. Horack came in. She had just come to get a yeast cake, Arlie heard her explain, since the snow had stopped the delivery wagon. But, shortly, Arlie could make out that the talk was of the revival, of herself, and with elaborate casualness, of the Shumans, of Herb. She blessed her mother for being volubly discreet.

In the following days Arlie was often in her own room, for Mrs. Horack was only the first of several, all with one pretext or another, and each seemingly unaware of the visits of others. But Arlie and her mother could not be unaware of the total nor of its meaning, nor of the zeal with which Mrs. Holcomb had continued her work.

Because Mrs. Gelston had to bear the ordeal alone, and could force no part of it on Arlie, there developed, under the clouds of recriminations, a feeble sense of community. The neighbors were descending, not on Arlie but on the Gelston family.

The long hours which Arlie had to herself, alone in the daytime without work, gave her time to review and foresee, and sometimes distantly to hear a strain of nocturnal music, vanishing before she could really listen, as a half

familiar name that dives into the depth of memory.

In the long months behind her she had given way too often before each little spasm of the will, before each flicker of its even current, to find all her plans eddying into despair. Now, if such a moment came, steadying herself she tried to look on the worst possible hours and preserve her calm. As she succeeded she found that the effort did not need to be made so often; her control was extending over the most unpleasant hours of housework, and even over those moments when it seemed that if her mother directed one more gibe at her form or clumsiness she must fly at her with sharp hands to tear her loose cheeks from the bones.

But at the end of the week she felt that she understood her mother for the first time; she could not put her understanding into terms, but it was there. First she wondered why her mother insisted on her corset and middies, and then why she did not tell her father. It might have been, but was not, tenderness. Rather it was a withholding from her husband of information that gave her a benighted sense of superiority. It was so helpless a way in which to be superior.

Then one morning she knew by her father's silence at breakfast, and by his sullen, frequent looks at her, that he had been told. His only comment had come when she bent over to pick up a knife. He slapped her resoundingly on ear and cheek. She looked up in a surprise of pain. "Hurry up, you clumsy fool," he had said. She left the room. But that night when Phil, who had heard of her on the streets, attempted to toss insults across the supper table, her father had quieted him sharply. Thereafter he never spoke of the matter in her hearing, though her mother told her that nightly he threatened to "get" Herb when he returned from California. At first Arlie was disturbed, but as she watched her father she realized that his general in-

effectiveness would permit no action, even though Herb were in Coon Falls. He would sulk, he would talk—largely—but he would not act.

She did not greatly care: she did not want him to act, but she had wanted to find him capable of action. The disappointment was only one more thing to be placed, one more thing to be dominated by the vigor that increased in her with every day of dwindling winter and the opening of spring. A vigor that freshened and at the same time matured her, forcing on her a strength she did not need, and that in its restraint became contentment, marred only by an occasional dread of the pain of birth. Because her mother insisted she wrote twice to Herb, but received no answers; and watched her mother's consequent tumult with what was almost amusement. If Herb came, well and good; she did not, even at that, have a sense that he was utterly gone from her. If he did not come . . . the lulling strength of her body was a natural defence against doubts that might waste that strength.

It seemed, indeed, that she grew with the strength of the year, and that time, long her enemy, was now her friend, announcing its allegiance in every fleck of green it touched into field and tree. The twigs were thickening with beads against the pale April sky; they budded through bronze to olive and through powdery yellow to the new green of spring, and were hastening to full leaf in early May, when her time was come. Even her mother seemed caught in the maternal uprush of the year, and told old tales of abortions, monstrosities, and dry births.

In the evenings Arlie would slip out for a walk along deserted roads, and the cool breath of the spring wind—for the wind in spring, for all its balm, has a cold heart—would send her back shivering from the pale light of naked stars to her changeless room, which more than ever was her own.

CHAPTER XI

THE OLD WIVES' TALE

I

THROUGH the latter part of April Arlie worked on some baby clothes, using remnants and purchasing a few pieces from a mail order house; for, although everything was known now, neither Arlie nor her mother cared to shop at the local stores for the articles required. She sewed listlessly, tired with the long hours of housework from which her mother insisted there should be no release—it was no more than right that she suffer. Occasionally hours came when the birth itself overshadowed everything, and Mrs. Gelston talked with the inveterate sagacity of women who have borne children to those who are about to bear them. Arlie learned much, but less and less did she fear. Suspense alone upheld her, and a rooted need for climax. She would hear only distant unmeaning words as her mother predicted unusual horrors for her—because of her size, her form, her sins, or her refusal to write another letter to “that Shuman.”

As they lived through the days nearer to May, Mrs. Gelston became difficult in a new fashion. She was not going to have a doctor. The three male doctors of the town, she held, were worthless—old Dr. Symes, young Dr. Kramer, and the nondescript Brewster. The only other doctor was a woman. “Josephine W. Taylor,

M.D." read her card in the professional directory of the *Coon Falls Herald*; it was said that she was a graduate of the University of Minnesota, and had practiced in some Minnesota town before coming to Coon Falls. When Arlie had suggested her, Mrs. Gelston had grown indignant. "Besides," she ended, "we ain't got no money for bringing such kids into the house."

"I don't ask you to pay, ma. I got nearly a hundred dollars saved, and you know it. I'll pay for my own doctor."

Mrs. Gelston had thereupon talked the harder, intimating that the money should have been paid for board and room, long before. But Arlie had the money well hidden. When the time came she would pay it out, she decided, to the doctor she wanted, and she wanted Dr. Taylor. It was not that she desired a woman; in fact, she had had enough of women, but she had come alone so much of the way that she darkly rebelled, not knowing why, against corrupting that harsh adventure with more familiarity than she could prevent. Symes, Kramer, Brewster, she had seen again and again. To have one of them would be to have Coon Falls.

But even on the morning of the third of May her mother had not given in, and that night about ten o'clock labor began. At first she was not sure of the pains; they might be only another internal disturbance, she thought, akin to the raw dry burning she had suffered before. Because she was not sure, she waited, and during the following hour the fears of the first weeks, the dread, the hopes, the frustrations of the later ones, pressed upon her bending will. When the second series of pains came she was in doubt no longer, and with the vanishing of doubt all fear went, too: her time had come, the climax of the twisted months.

In a few hours her child would be lying in her arms, or by her side, demanding a love which, she realized

suddenly, she was not prepared to give. They would be separate persons then. Only a cruel and unjust bond would hold them together, the child demanding, demanding, and she alone in the world, compelled—by what?—to care for it. Innocently, helplessly, flagrantly it would be the growing symbol of her disgrace, which wouldn't be a disgrace at all if it weren't for Mrs. Nolte, Mrs. Holcomb, Mrs . . . all Coon Falls, all Iowa. . . . And this would be, too, the close of her life. She had been spurned, of late, in her own home, but in her own home she had been important. Her father had been gentle, Phil had been silent, even her mother had been impressed before the imminent flourish of pain.

But when the second pain faded to fatigue she began to feel again her own significance and was about to call her mother, when she thought better of it. First labors, she knew, were long ones, continuing often from twelve hours up to two days. No—she preferred to rest in bed, or to rock by the open window, through which the night breathed, thick, cool, murmurous.

The lights of the town shone brilliantly, and cars were passing. After a time the cars ceased; one by one the yellow windows filled with black. Through the wide, still, gray business of the night she rocked her way, gently, toward dawn. When the dark was stillest, time was told by the increasing frequency of the pains, which twisted her and caused her to grip whatever was at hand, to become an intenser point of silence in the night. Twice she napped, waking the second time to find a haze of light along the eastern sky. A solitary automobile passed with lights burning, but even as it passed the driver turned them out. The dull massive horizon was bordered with rose and gold, and the burning rondure of the sun ascended, flooding the town with clarity.

Because she had not witnessed full dawn recently it seemed to her an incredibly long time before the family

began to stir. Cars, wagons, buggies were passing now and then.

She waited.

A few minutes after seven her mother came to the door, brushing her hair. "Why ain't you got breakfast started?" she asked, seeing Arlie at the window. "You know as well's I do you got to earn your keep. Your pa's going to be late again."

"Once won't matter," Arlie answered. "I can't get breakfast this morning." She sought the bed, another pain was sending its premonitory thrills along her back. "Can't you see, ma? I'm sick." Her face twisted to unloveliness, and her eyes had their light withdrawn until not even pleading was in them.

"Sick!" Mrs. Gelston advanced, and as she came was unable to restrain a smile that came wildly, in its own energy, and her eyes were alight with climax and intrusive interest. For the time she lived only within the concern of birth. Not since she had tried to draw from Arlie all intimate detail of her hour with Herb—time and place, approach and aftermath—had she lived so entirely within the self-interest of life. Her smile grew broader, flaunting her participation; and then: "Why Arlie, when did it begin?"

"Last night, when I come to bed. About ten it musta been."

Mrs. Gelston sat down. "Well—well my God! And you been at it all night. . . . Does it hurt much yet?"

"Hurt's enough."

"Want something to eat? . . . Maybe you'd better not though."

"I'm hungry all right. I suppose you know best, ma. You been here before."

Mrs. Gelston thought for a long time. There had been other years: "They let me eat," she said at last. "I'll get you something." The smile broke again wildly, and

Arlie tried to answer and include herself in this new and brief community by drawing her own lips to a smile, but pain slowly curved the attempt into a grimace. Mrs. Gelston put a supporting arm around her daughter, and Arlie looked at her from quickly distant eyes.

"I'm not laughing at you, Arlie. I don't know what. . . . Is it going?"

Arlie nodded and sat down. When she had breathed quietly a few times she spoke. "I guess it's time to get a doctor now. I want Dr. Taylor. I wish you'd 'phone her."

Her mother's face set into a more familiar mold at this mention of something outside that in which she had been wholly living.

"Oh, so you want Dr. Taylor, do you? I suppose a man ain't good enough for you!"

"But I got to have a doctor. You know that as well as I do."

"*Do I?*"

"Of course you do. And I want—oh, get her please! I want her."

"Sure you do. You're modest, you are. *You* got to have a woman. You nice, modest, little—"

"It don't make no difference what you call me, ma. I am what I am, I guess, and—"

"Listen," Mrs. Gelston mocked. "Listen to her talk, will you?"

"Ma, you're going to 'phone Dr. Taylor or I'm going to."

"Huh, maybe I won't let you."

"Then I'll walk to her office."

Mrs. Gelston left the room and did not return until after breakfast. Arlie fretted but knew there was time; besides, she didn't want to go down while her father and brother were there. From the window she saw Phil slink away, and then her father. She thought that she ought

to feel sorry for both, but was glad, even in this way, to hit Phil's pride. Yet her father's slouch, and his weariness, disturbed her for a pale moment. She herself was making him older. Then her concern for him gave before the pressure of her own struggle.

When Mrs. Gelston did return Arlie took the offensive. "Ma, I want you to go right back and 'phone Dr. Taylor. I want her and I'm going to have her. And when you come back bring me some breakfast. I'm hungry, I been up all night."

"I *see* myself waiting on you. Get your own breakfast."

Arlie leaned for support against the bed. The breeze from the open window swayed her nightgown, over the back of which fell a single dark braid of hair, drawn from her high forehead. As she answered, the words seemed to absorb the energy which had kept her, for the moment, steadily erect; she wavered. "All right, I'll get my own breakfast. But you get the doctor. I won't have you touch me."

Before her daughter's slow, painful, intense advance, Mrs. Gelston backed away: "My God, that I should come to this . . . calling a doctor for a . . . I won't say it . . . from my own daughter." Sobs began. "It's the first time it ever happened in *my* family!"

"Oh, well,"—Arlie was moving from the chair and along the wall to the door—"blame it on pa's family."

Mrs. Gelston went down the stairs to the telephone, with Arlie following at a slow distance, interrupting her advance several times for rest and steadiness. She arrived at the dining-room only in time to hear the last of the conversation: "Yes . . . kitty-corner from the Horacks' and down the block, a yellow one by itself. . . . No, I don't know. . . . I don't know. Good-bye."

"What don't you know?" Arlie inquired, sinking into a chair.

"None of your business," her mother answered sullenly. "What you doing down here?"

"You said you wouldn't get me no breakfast."

"You get back. I don't want that doctor to find you here."

Arlie began the return, and it seemed to her that she had hardly reached the bed before she heard an automobile stopping, and then a slow, ponderous progress across the porch. The door-bell rang decisively, and she heard her mother hesitating in the hallway before the door opened.

"Good morning, I am Dr. Taylor." The tones filled the words of the greeting to their brims, and each word fell distinctly separate from its fellows.

"Yes . . . just upstairs, Doctor. I was just getting some breakfast for Arlie. She didn't feel well this morning and wanted me to call you . . . I don't know what's the matter. . . . She wouldn't tell me. . . . She's sort of . . . you know. You go on up and see her."

For answer came a deliberate ascent of the stairs, and as the footsteps came nearer a puffing was audible. Then the doorway was filled with a black skirt and white blouse, and rising above it a corpulent but handsome face—small curved nose, small perfect lips, and large eyes of pale hazel that rolled as slowly and comprehensively as the doctor walked. The medicine case was almost lost behind the skirt.

"Well, so you are the sick girl, are you?" The doctor, with a glance at the old brown dresser, drew a chair to the bed and subsided.

Another pain was on its way—it would not be so hard to bear now. Arlie wanted to speak before it came, to say—so much—but could utter only unintelligible sounds before she had to clench her teeth and twist to withhold the cry that was forcing its way up instead. The doctor's face sobered; she leaned forward, and Arlie tried to look desperately into her an understanding of

the whole situation. The pain faded, and she relaxed.

"Hmmm," breathed Dr. Taylor. "Your mother told me she didn't know what was wrong with you. I think you have a very unobserving mother. How long?"—she reached a hand for Arlie's wrist—"how long have these pains been coming?"

"Last night—about ten."

The doctor's eyebrows arched and dropped. "How is it," she asked, as she rose to continue her examination, "that your mother doesn't know?"

"She does. She's lying. She just don't want to let on. You see . . ." Arlie hesitated.

"Yes, all right. I think I see all I need to, except about yourself. Turn on your back."

2

"Now," she said, when she had completed her examination, "I'm going to ask you some questions that I don't want you to answer unless you feel like it. First, though, let me tell you that you are in perfect condition. It's all going to go beautifully. Now . . ." Her arm—sleekness over brawn that had lifted Arlie a moment before like a doll—reached out to take Arlie's hand. The tan of it was uniform. "Grip—harder," she said.

"That helped," Arlie whispered.

"Now," Dr. Taylor resumed, "I take it that your mother doesn't care very much—to become a grandmother?"

"No. . . . You see, I'm not married, so the baby won't have no father—not that way, I mean." Dr. Taylor's eyes seemed to grow a shade lighter. "But I have some money saved," Arlie hurried. "I'll pay you myself. . . ." She stopped, watching the doctor's face.

"Um-hmm. You have as much as twenty-five dollars saved, do you?"

"Oh well! I have almost a hundred."

"You have? That's fine. But . . . your mother really knows all about this, you say?"

Arlie nodded again.

"I thought so," the doctor said, half to herself, measuring the words as if they were medicines. "I think," and she got on her feet, "that I'll talk to your mother a little. She should have brought you some breakfast. Maybe I can hurry it." As she left the room Arlie felt both desolate and comforted.

She could hear them talking down stairs, and then, after a time, the doctor's ascent. She entered with a tray —toast, boiled eggs, and coffee, which she fed to Arlie.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to leave you for a while. You're coming finely, and I want you to keep it up. Only, while I'm gone, don't force anything, just go along with the pain, not any farther. Understand? I've told your mother what to do. She'll do it. I'll be back presently."

Mrs. Gelston walked in, weeping. "Doctor, nothing like this ever happened in my family before. It's awful. Why, I never suspected. . . . You dirty little puppy." Her face puckered as she bent over Arlie. "I'd like to whale you!" She shook her face down at Arlie's.

Dr. Taylor's arm brushed Mrs. Gelston back, and she retreated farther. "It was that Shuman, I know it was," she whimpered. "Wasn't it, Arlie?" she appealed, as if the point had been contested. For the moment Arlie could not answer; then: "You know it was, ma. Why pretend you don't know a thing about it? You've known three or four months now."

"Why, no such thing, you little liar. I never knew till five minutes ago that you'd—"

Dr. Taylor had turned to look at her. She stopped, confused. "Honest, Doctor, she lies like that. Why . . ." Her words trailed out and she sought the window.

"Not too much talking, Mrs. Gelston," the doctor was saying.

3

The doctor had gone and come and gone again, promising to return at once. In the meantime Mrs. Gelston examined the changes that had been made with such surprising deftness: the bed with its rubber sheet and padding, the washbowl with dull red rubber gloves afloat in the blue solution of bichloride, the cleared dresser, ranged with antiseptic packages. Contempt lined her face as she poked among them, but she said very little, and when Arlie spoke went to give her what help she could.

"Is she coming, ma? Look and see."

Mrs. Gelston lifted the faded scrim curtain. "Of course she ain't. She won't be here for a couple of hours yet. You ain't anywhere near the second stage. They never aim to come till then." She settled herself in the rocker near the window. "What you tell her I lied for? Ain't it enough for you to bring all this on us without calling your mother a liar? What if I do try to ease up a little on it? Shame on you."

Arlie submitted again to the quickening rhythm of her body, but did not ask for help. Her mother watched with interest. "Yes," she said, "you can bear it now and not say a word, but just wait—you'll yell, you'll yell bloody murder."

Arlie lay back once more. "Don't . . . I'll scream if you want. Stop talking."

"Yeh, stop talking—with your father and Phil too 'shamed to come home for dinner. It's nearly two now, and they won't come after this. And I hope that doctor don't neither. I'd just like to look at you—yeh. Scream, you little fool, scream! It'll help you. Let it out, I say!" She bent over the bed again, her face pressing her desire close to Arlie's, that was flushed

and hard as the bone beneath. "Yeh," she leaned closer, baring her small white teeth.

"Why,"—on a rough indrawal of breath—"do you want me to scream? I will, though, I will." The sobs thickened and then ebbed within control. "I won't!" she flung. "Get out, or I'll . . ." Mrs. Gelston backed to the window, and then, without looking out, was back at the bed, half sitting there, half kneeling, and putting her hand out to Arlie's brow. "There, Arlie. I—I don't know what . . . it's been too much for me, I guess. I'll be good to you. Only you been a bad girl and I . . . there, there. . . . Do you want me to hold your hand?" She was weeping so fully and abandonedly she could not find the hand that her own was seeking.

Time passed, until, even in her absorption in the torturous weaving, Arlie heard the automobile outside. Her mother was stroking her forehead.

Dr. Taylor had returned to stay to the end this time, she informed them as she crossed the room.

"Doctor," Arlie reached out a hand. "I'm so glad you come." Her mother watched the doctor with eyes that sought offence.

"Mrs. Gelston," the doctor turned, "I wish you'd go down to put some more water on to boil." Mrs. Gelston left.

"How much longer, Doctor?" Arlie asked, half an hour later. She was beginning to feel the extent of time, that had stretched in a pale wavering length from yesterday morning until the present. It was like her heart, going on ceaselessly; only one didn't realize it, because one slept, usually.

"Not very long, now. Two hours, maybe. You're close to the second stage."

"Where'd you go?" Arlie managed to ask later.

"Out in the country a ways. Don't talk now."

Time began to blur, and to confuse itself with other

days, hours beneath the starlit trees, but with an ecstasy of torture alive in her; and then the room would clear and she would see the doctor with her rolled-up sleeves and rubber gloves soaking her hands in the wash-bowl, raising them to let the blue drops fall, and she would be holding her mother's hands and pulling, and as she pulled would be going somewhere, going through a struggle of elements, fighting Grendel in a blue gloom, blue as the drip from the dull red gloves, and winning her way, inch by inch. As she bore down, her whole body quivered with a savage delight of pain, as if she were worsting all the forces that had beset her.

Like a new pain a bell rang, and her mother was talking, then leaving. "Bring him up," the doctor was saying. "This is the place for him . . . but bring him."

Whom were they bringing? "Keep them out," she moaned. "Don't let . . . in. They hate me."

"There . . . just pull harder. Work now—all you can. It won't be long."

Phil—was it Phil, standing by the doctor, his hat in his hand, his face toward her, pale and thin-lipped?

"No, you see about that water, Mrs. Gelston. . . . Go on, Mr. Shuman, there's a moment now. But say quick whatever you're going to say."

Herb?

He had taken her hands. "Arlie—I—"

"Herb, don't look at me, now."

"I won't, Arlie. I just want to tell you I'm on my way to Douglas, to the court house. A license, you know. I'll be back, as fast as God'll let me, I'll be back . . . I didn't know. . . ." He faded out, and she was gripped again, and when she opened her eyes the door was closed.

"Was that Herb?"

"It was."

"But he's in California."

"He was, but just now he's in Iowa."

He had said he was going somewhere. She ought to know, he had told her, but she couldn't remember. It was all blurring again and falling into darkness. Did she have to go through another night and the long coming of dawn?

"What time was Herb here?" she asked, when the doctor turned on the light.

"About four-thirty. He had a blow-out or he'd have been here sooner."

"Is it raining?"

"It's been raining ever since he left. You must *not* talk. You can't work when you do, and the harder you work now the sooner you'll be through."

5

At times she could hear the drizzle and hiss of rain, and the fresh gurgle of water in the spouts. In the lulls in her struggle she recognized the doctor's face, with its remarkably small features, as intently closer.

"Hurry," the doctor called to some one. And her fingers quickened until she produced a white hood of gauze that descended over Arlie's nose and mouth, penetrating and sickening her into insecurity, and she was sinking to a warm depth, then into aisles of corn up which she forced herself—on and on into the thickness, past stalk and stalk rising green and slender, infinitely repeated, and she herself was the black earth straining beneath. Somewhere a relief. She was sinking back from a height achieved. In the darkness that was suddenly radiant with yellow wires dimming and going out, a raucous cry.

"What is it?" she wanted to ask, but was overwhelmed in the corn tossing into waves on whose crest she rode and rode until they whitened and let her fall, gently and with imperceptible ease, into her own bed.

"It's a boy"—the doctor's voice. "A sod-buster!"

It took her a moment to realize that this was the end of what she had been through. At first the child had no relation to her struggle. She had been laboring with pain, for no result.

6

Presently the bed had been changed and was magically clean, and Arlie, bandaged and in a fresh nightgown, looked about. Yes, it was over.

But her mother was fidgeting. "I wonder where that Shuman is. He shoulda been back long ago. I bet he's just run off again."

"It is late," the doctor said, looking at her watch. "Ten-thirty. Let's see, the baby was born at nine. Almost twenty-four hours of it, Arlie." She smiled as she folded a cloth.

Then it all came back, turned up from layers of time long hidden by others: Herb in the room, bending over her, and going, at four-thirty—going, yes, for a marriage license.

"Yes sir, he's just cut out again," Mrs. Gelston reiterated.

"You wait," the doctor said, "I rather believe in that boy, after all."

"Well, I don't. He's the scum of the earth."

Arlie was too dazed to ask more or to argue. Serenity was bathing her, and she did not care, except for the cool silvery twilight through which she was falling to the dark comfort below.

7

She woke to the sound of voices, people in the room—men, her father, a bald some one with a fringe of red-

gray hair and a nose. But she looked up into Herb's face.

"I'm back, Arlie. Did you think I wasn't coming?"

"I didn't think, Herb, not at all."

"You see, I broke down—the car did; and then I ran out of gas—a mile out of Douglas. I had to run, and then hunt an hour to get a car to come back on. But I got here. . . . I hope you won't mind my marrying you in a muddy suit, Arlie?"

"You *want* to marry me, Herb?"

The people across the room had ceased talking, involuntarily listening, but the doctor's voice boomed in, a screen of loudness behind which their own near tones would be unheard.

"I don't want nothing else but to marry you, Arlie, if you'll have me after the way I treated you. I been in hell ever since I come back."

"Of course I want you to, but not just because I have a baby now. . . ."

"My God, Arlie, listen—when I was here this afternoon, I—your face was like a fist, it was. I never saw such a face."

"Don't remember."

"I'll remember the face you got now, then. And I love you, kid, I love you." He had her hand and was pressing it."

"And I do you, Herb."

He had turned away but her hand would not let him leave. He was beckoning to some one, to Reverend Pingrey, who came to the bedside.

"Well, Arlie . . . I'm glad it's turning out this way. You can be a—I know you can make yourself a good wife. You'll have the Lord helping you, Arlie. He won't desert you."

"Come on," Herb interrupted. "Let's begin."

With the first words of the marriage service she felt

that she was going to drift down and away from all of them. Little was clear, and that little was expanding into fundamental dizziness. They were drawing from her words she did not want to give. Even Herb was urging her to say them. She was being married. Far above her impotence, like gods, they were performing in the bluish gloom a ritual that would do to her—she did not know what. It was not fair. As in a nightmare she could only struggle, with infinite ineffectuality, against them and what they were making her say. Her words were separate from her, sounds detached from any personal source, hostile murmurs. “I pronounce you man and wife.” Herb’s lips were on hers, hot and close. *He* had no reason to cry, and she had not the strength.

“You’re my wife now, Arlie.”

She was solid on the bed again, and all was clear—Herb, the doctor’s face across the room, and her father was coming up. Herb gave place to him.

“Hello, pa,” she said. Had he been there all the time?

“Hello, Mrs. Shuman,” he replied. “I’m pleased to meet you. . . . Congratulations, Arlie.” And then, in an awkward swoop, he kissed her forehead. Her mother was talking in the corner, and Herb was talking to the doctor, who turned from him to clear the room.

When all had left but Herb the doctor came to the bedside.

“Well,” she began, “it’s been . . . but . . . why, you haven’t seen the baby yet.” She placed a huddle of blankets by Arlie’s side.

“It’s a boy, Arlie,” Herb said.

“Don’t you suppose I know that?” He needn’t have spoken so exasperatingly. She looked at the dark wet little head, and the vague knot of its features.

“He’s all right, is he?” she asked.

“Fine as silk,” the doctor answered. “Seven pounds and an ounce.”

Herb bent over to look more closely, and at his puzzled expression Arlie sank back. "I ought to love him, I suppose," she said, "but I don't. He's . . . I don't know." She could find no words to express her lack of feeling for the alien little bundle at her side—hers and yet so utterly not hers.

She turned to look at him again, but he was gone, and Herb was bending over to kiss her good-night.

"We'll have to find a name for it," she said, and relaxed into an exhaustion that could not reply by any sign whatever to the vague words, becoming vaguer and farther away, that he was saying above her.

PART TWO

CHAPTER XII

BRIGHT VALLEY

I

STANDING behind a closed upstairs window in the Shuman farmhouse Arlie looked out. From a hazy union with the June sky the green of emerging corn grew separate down the black purity of field sloping to the red barn and silo. Behind these, and on each side, the infinitely-leaved and tremulous bright foliage of a grove caught into itself the green of lush surrounding grassland. A day of green and blue and black.

Her fingers stroked the cool linen of the housedress Mrs. Shuman had brought recently from Des Moines, but her thoughts were not on the dress nor on its companions in the ample closet; she was content to be reassured again, by the land itself, of that security of comfort, drawn from the land, that for a month now had been bringing her almost to peace. At present she wanted the nearer presence of the land. She might go out to the hammock in the grove—but soon the baby would wake. Instead she opened the window on the faint wide roar of the summer day and pressed her forehead against the screen. Mrs. Gardewine was nearing the house with a basket of peas and Arlie waved to her. “Isn’t it beautiful today!”

“I ain’t got time to look at no day,” said Mrs. Gardewine. “I got to hurry lunch.”

"I'll shell the peas for you if you'll just wait," Arlie called to her disappearing figure. "I got to nurse the baby now."

2

A month of Bright Valley. She had come two weeks after the birth of the baby, as soon as Dr. Taylor had permitted. The days in the old house at Coon Falls had been, on the whole, happy days, because all that now was real, and in its reality a little disappointing, had then been foreseen as perfection. Herb had come every day, sometimes twice a day, and had staid for hours. On three occasions he had brought his mother.

The first visit had not been easy.

Arlie had imagined meeting her mother-in-law in the dining-room at Bright Valley, where she had lunched with Mr. Shuman. There sat all her fears. But on the second day after her marriage, when she had turned drowsily in the morning expecting to see the doorway framing Herb, she had found it containing, instead, his mother. After all, it had been easier so.

Mrs. Shuman had advanced as if with courage, and prepared—after a day and a morning, Arlie learned later, that had not been easy—for a difficult task. Herb, hesitating at her shoulder, had been about to speak when his mother, sitting down by the bed, had taken Arlie's hand in her own.

"Are you feeling better?" she had finally asked.

"Yes, I'm all right now; a little weak, maybe, but all right," Arlie answered.

"That's good. I . . . it's been hard for you, I know. Herbert, come here. I want to see you together. Sit down, on the edge of the bed. *Gently*, Herbert. Now . . . no, go away. I don't want to talk to you both. I thought I did."

When he had gone Mrs. Shuman remained silent,

clasping her hands in her lap. Arlie could see that control was not easy for her, and that tears were gathering in her eyes. "Don't, Mrs. Shuman." Again she touched the hand at her side. "I know it's hard for you, it is for me, too."

Mrs. Shuman ignored the hand. "But it's all so horribly real!" she protested. "Yesterday it was different . . . but now, that horrible dresser!"

Arlie looked at the dresser that for so many years had been inoffensively familiar. It was brown and worn as ever, though a little neater and more official with its bottles and medical array. "The dresser?" she inquired.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I don't know . . ." her mother-in-law answered; and then, more directly: "You say you're all right, do you?"

"Yes, I'm all right, if only . . ."

"Yes, only what?"

"If only *you'll* be, and give me a chance, you know."

"It's not going to be easy for any of us, is it?" A sigh followed the question.

"No, but—"

"Can you keep house?" Mrs. Shuman broke in. "Can you sew? Do you read much?"

"I kept this house, practically. I ain't—I haven't had much time to read." (Just why had she said that, she wondered. She had read magazine after magazine in the last months.) But Mrs. Shuman did not seem to have heard. She was walking about the room, pausing at the window.

"If only it hadn't been this way!" she said.

"I know." Arlie mingled humility and defiance in her tones. "I know well as you, I guess. But I only . . . ain't been good with Herb, Mrs. Shuman. I only ain't—"

"*Don't talk about it! Don't talk about it!*" With that, Mrs. Shuman sat down by the bed again. "I wish,"

she said, bending nearer, "I wish I could . . . just take you in my arms, Arlie, and forget everything. I feel I ought to do it, but somehow I can't. I know you've had an awful time of it, but I don't feel the hardness of it for you yet. Just for myself and my own family. . . . But I'm going now. I don't want to see the baby. He's asleep anyway. I'll see him next time. I know I shouldn't disturb you, and I'm afraid I have. It's too much for me today, that's all. I'll . . . I'll come again."

Stiffly she had kissed Arlie on the forehead and had gone. When Herb returned he and Arlie were silent together.

The next time Mrs. Shuman had held the baby for half an hour, discussing its clothes and care with Arlie and her mother, and all were drawn closer by this common interest. On her last visit the talk was of Arlie's wardrobe and of the various purchases to be made on Mrs. Shuman's trip to Des Moines.

After that, and for some time after her arrival at Bright Valley, Arlie had not tried to distinguish exactly what those around her were feeling or thinking; she was too much engrossed with her new mode of life. The farmhouse at Bright Valley had all the conveniences of a city home. Mrs. Shuman herself was from the city, Mr. Shuman would not give up the country, and his means permitted the compromise of a rural luxury and convenience hardly paralleled in twenty Iowa counties. There were many houses that were as large, and a few that possessed the conveniences, but life in the others went on for the most part as in the farmhouses of two decades before: the bathrooms were unused; the dining-room was a living-room and the back porch was the hired men's clubhouse. Not so at Bright Valley. There the hired men not only had their own house, but lived in it; and the Shuman house, with all its conveniences, was in-

telligently used. From this home, Arlie gathered, Mrs. Shuman had been accustomed to descend upon Lawson, there to dominate as many of the women's activities as she cared to; and every summer the clubwomen of Lawson, with their families, came to Bright Valley for a great picnic. The picnic was to be omitted this year.

Knowledge of that omission, coming to her casually through Herb, reduced Arlie's two daily showerbaths from gay watery adventures to mere routine as she tried, for the first time at Bright Valley, to make out her own position. Mr. Shuman, she was sure, was not so much disturbed as was his wife. At the table he joked with her, inquiring after the baby's gain for the day and speaking sagaciously, as one expert to another, on the varieties of stock food; then he would describe experiments with hogs and refer to the baby as "the little white pig" until his wife protested.

What Mrs. Shuman was thinking in her long silences—at the table and in the living-room after dinner in the evenings—Arlie could not discover. Gradually her mother-in-law advanced toward intimacy, but always she protruded a certain angularity of emotion, composed of innumerable false starts and jerkings-back, that held them apart.

Shortly, Mrs. Shuman had begun to call Arlie's attention to articles in the *Outlook*, which she herself read regularly, along with the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Mr. Shuman's reading, Arlie noticed with interest, was *Wallace's Farmer*, the *Des Moines Register*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and an occasional article in the *Atlantic Monthly* which had been praised by his wife. Herb dabbled in all the magazines and had a remarkable memory for Ding's cartoons, which he would frequently and laboriously re-create, in words, at the luncheon table.

Mrs. Shuman would advance on Arlie indirectly,

"Peter," she would say to her husband, "did you read that essay by L. P. Jacks in the *Atlantic*?" Then, after a résumé of the essay she would turn to gather Herb's opinion; and from Herb she turned regularly to Arlie. At first Arlie could only murmur "I don't know," and search out the *Atlantic* afterwards. Later she would remark, "I thought it was fine," whether she had read it or not.

When she and Herb were alone Herb would growl with irritation, but Arlie carefully omitted herself from the criticism of his mother. "I don't know, Herb," she said once. "I don't get things very well, maybe. Not like she does anyway. But it's sort of interesting to hear her talk about them."

"Oh, of course mother's well posted. You got to hand it to her on that. She knows lots more'n dad does about things. But she doesn't need to pick at you that way all the time, especially about grammar."

"Yes, but I suppose it's good for me," she answered, and the talk shifted.

There had come an evening when Arlie and Mrs. Shuman were alone on the screened porch. "You know, Arlie," Mrs. Shuman had suddenly said, "I think you have the making of a fine woman in you, and I want to help you all I can. I know I can't just touch you always. I'm too old, I guess." She paused and they drew closer in the evening that was washing the sky with deepening gray. Arlie tensed herself toward the older woman, wanting that breaking gesture of rapport they had not achieved. Hands rested on her arms, hands that would have drawn her close had they not held her where she was. "It's—" Mrs. Shuman began. "No . . . I can't. Something's out of me or we'd understand each other better. But I care for you, Arlie, now; and I want you to care for me."

"Of course, I do . . . just a lot." Arlie looked up, and a kiss was withheld between them. Arms around each other they walked across the porch toward the wider light without, and an uncomfortable sense was growing in them that the moment would come to withdraw their arms; if, indeed, that moment had not passed.

"It's just . . . all that . . . that makes me want you to read a little more, to keep up your education, you know. . . . You didn't read that article I spoke of, did you?"

"N—no. I haven't really had the time since you mentioned it."

"No, I suppose not." Their arms relaxed and were withdrawn. Presently Mrs. Shuman inquired, "The baby's asleep?"

"Yes, but I wonder if I changed him? . . . I guess I'll see." Escape, through the long living-room, darkly furnitured, through the hall and up the stairs.

Thereafter Arlie was a little more self-conscious as she read, and could not feel at home in the contented silence of people reading in the evening. The silence, like her mother-in-law, made its demands on her.

Instead, she dreamed—of the baby, of vaguely colored future days, of Herb, and what he was to mean; of Herb as her "husband"—an unaccountable word of such ordinary meaning before, and of only partially fathomed and obscure significance at present. Because of the circumstances of their marriage she had an unusual time in which to come to know him through the intimate contacts of daily life, but without finality. Their real marriage must come with the weeks. For the present they talked, ate together, and were inmates of the same house, with the common, peculiar interest of the baby. Sometimes at night when the baby cried Herb would come in

from his adjoining room to offer his help; and occasionally he walked the floor with the baby, who was rocked and nursed in accordance with his own will rather than with the final convenience of his mother.

When the baby had gone back to sleep, Arlie and Herb, wide awake by that time, would talk for half an hour, Arlie curled up in the bed and Herb blowing his cigarette smoke through the window. Because they were and were not husband and wife, a rare deliciousness clung to these nocturnal colloquies. It was during one of them that Arlie learned of Dr. Taylor's visit to Bright Valley on the baby's birthday.

She had driven up by the side of the house, Herb had told her, to sit in her car honking the horn. Mrs. Gardewine, who went out, returned for Herb.

"I am Dr. Taylor," she had informed him, "of Coon Falls. In a very few hours I expect to deliver a child of yours. I regard the mother as a very fine girl. I think she will make you a good wife."

Herb stared at her.

"Do you want me to drive you to the courthouse for a license," she went on, "or do you have a car of your own?"

"I got one of my own," he had answered, and thereupon she sent her roadster whirling around the drive, and heading it for the road had stopped again. "How soon," she asked, "shall we expect you?"

"Well, things just broke right then. That was the end of it for me. 'About as quick as I can get there,' I says. 'I got to get some money first.' That was all she wanted. Just snorted out of the yard in that roadster of hers, but I tell you she had a rope around my neck and the other end in her hand. So I hunted up dad and blurted the whole damn' thing out to him and asked for some money. Somehow he wasn't surprised. Just asked me if it was you. He remembered you, see? And

when I says yes he shelled out and—and you know the rest, I guess."

"Did your dad say anything about me?" Arlie had asked.

"No, no more'n I said."

"Didn't he *do* anything?"

"No. . . . He looked sorta white around the gills was all. Oh, and he told mother when I didn't get back for dinner. He—he made it a lot easier for me with her, I can tell you."

"But it took the doctor to make you come, didn't it?"

"Naw, you got it all wrong, Arlie. She just showed me how bad I wanted to come, really, down in my heart, I mean. Why, when I got started I was so happy the old car couldn't go fast enough, and when I ran out of gas and didn't know at first what was wrong my old heart just beat like a trip-hammer. I damn' near cried, Arlie, I was so mad and miserable, and when I was finally going to your place with the minister and everything I was so damn' happy I wanted to sing, only I didn't because I was worried I wouldn't get there before the baby did. Gee . . . I wish I had."

"It doesn't matter, Herb. Besides, I couldn't of taken time out for that then."

"No, I suppose not." They smiled, and in the darkness he bent over to kiss her. "I love you, kid. I did all the time. Maybe you think I had a good time in California. Hell, I wouldn't give that trip to my worst enemy. I'm not one of these gay tom-cats, Arl. Maybe I didn't write, but believe me, I never looked at anything pretty without I remembered you and what you said that Sunday. It was just that I didn't know what to do, or *how* to do it, exactly. And the week we got back here I—the folks thought I was sick."

The frankness with which he had told her everything served as a warrant to Arlie for the truth of his defence.

She was not so sure of what he had to say about California. He reiterated that he had been "a yellow dog to go off that way"; but he had wanted a good time; he hadn't been ready "to settle down"; he had "changed from a kid to a man since last fall." Thereafter, when the topic reappeared, Arlie led the conversation afield, or assured him that she understood "perfectly." Rather it was the fear that she would never be able to understand, except to Herb's injury, that made her wary. She wanted peace now.

Because of this need for peace she was dreading the arrival of Herb's sister Gloria, due home in a few days after a visit at a Wisconsin lake with sorority friends.

"Just what is she like?" she had asked Herb, experiencing, as she thought of Gloria, a flash of panic.

"Don't worry," he had responded. "She'll be all right. She's a little stuck on herself now she's in the U. Makes a hell of a rumpus about little things. She just needs a little strong handling. Sit on her once or twice—hard. She'll be good to you."

3

On the June morning when Arlie told Mrs. Gardewine that she would be down to shell the peas, she had just finished nursing the baby and was about to start for the kitchen when Herb came in. "Where you going?" he asked, and when told, motioned her back. "Let that go. That's what the old girl's paid for. I want to talk to you a bit."

"Let's go in your room then. We'll wake the baby here."

When they had softly closed the door he sank into a chair and to Arlie's "What is it?" for a long moment answered nothing.

"We got to decide on something," he said finally. "I'm

tired of hanging around here. I want a home of my own."

"Why, what's the matter? I thought things were lovely."

"You don't expect to stay here always, do you?"

Had she been staying on sufferance, Herb's as well as his parents'? And had she been alone? "I thought *we* were staying," she said.

"*We*, then. But I'm tired of all this going-on of mother's. You're good enough for me, I guess."

Confusion ran in her mind. "Do—do they say I'm not good enough for you, Herb? I was beginning to think I was. They're kind to me, I think, considering."

"If mother would just stop picking at you. Dad's all right."

"But she don't—doesn't pick. Not any more'n she ought to. I *need* to know a lot of things."

"Let her tell you herself, then. *I'm* not going to nag you."

She was silent, surveying the background that with his last words had vertiginously deepened. There was more said that was not said to her than she had suspected—comment after comment on her shortcomings. The baby had not been all. She herself, properly married, would still have been unwelcome, because—she was what she was. She had not thought of that. Indeed she had felt that her complete acceptance was only a matter of time. What contentment she had was false. Personally, she would never be accepted, despite Mrs. Shuman's efforts at affection. At least she wouldn't be accepted till she was a different person, and when she was different—then would the baby begin to count against her more heavily than he did at present?

So puzzling she could not respond suggestively to the other things Herb had been talking of for the last few minutes.

. . . "So the garage ought to be a good thing for me, though I don't know that I want to live in Haley very much."

"Oh, that would be all right. Anywhere, Herb."

"The Ford agency is sure a winner, believe me; but I think I could do better with insurance and real estate and a little stock-buying right here in Lawson. I sorta know the ropes around here."

"Why not here, then?" Arlie asked. "We could get a nice little house, and it would be fun."

Herb glanced out the window. "But you see, there's the kid. . . . We got to think of him, growing up and all." It was the first time Herb had mentioned the baby's future and their relation to it. She found herself looking down a vista palely but painfully like her months of pregnancy in Coon Falls. Concealment and evasion, defence and again defence against the inquisitiveness of the town and countryside. "But won't people know even in Haley soon enough?"

"Not till we get going anyway. Then it won't matter so much. Time, you know."

Arlie did know, and smiled at what she knew, of time.

4

The next Saturday when Mr. and Mrs. Shuman left for Lawson to meet the train that was bringing Gloria home, Arlie retired to her room. She remained there throughout the distant flurry of the home-coming. Herb had gone to Haley the day before to look over the garage, and Arlie dreaded to go down alone to face the owner of the voice that vibrated so resonantly below, so novel a note in the household. Then they came upstairs to Gloria's room and Arlie could make out a part of their conversation:

"I just *couldn't* take that local, mother, when I could get the through train later. There was such a pleas-

ant bunch in the Pullman too. I was glad I waited. I met Fred Rickaby's sister—Mabel, Helen,—I forget her name, but she's at Illinois. We had a dandy talk. She's just full of pep. . . . This? No! It's a rag, but I thought it would do for today. It's so awfully dusty sometimes." With the closing of the door their talk was a murmur.

Were they talking of her?

Presently Mrs. Shuman went downstairs; then, after a longer time, Gloria. Arlie knew that she should go too, that dinner would soon be ready. She would have to go then—unless she pinched the baby to make him cry.

Smoothing her dress, the best Mrs. Shuman had purchased, she looked in the mirror. The dress shone silkily and was a "perfect fit." The new way of dressing her hair seemed becoming, too, drawn as it was to conceal the height of her forehead and to make her cheekbones a little less prominent. Her returning color was helping both her contour and her eyes. She wished, though, that her eyebrows were a little less bushy.

Another look at the baby, who had his arms flung back to let his rosy hands curl by his ears, reassured her. He was responsibility and certification. Braced, she went down.

Gloria sat by the library table, turning the pages of a magazine. She looked up critically at Arlie, who stood in the centre of the room, hesitant between an impulsive greeting and retreat.

Gloria let the magazine slip to her lap and extended a rosily manicured hand. "I suppose you're Arlie," she said.

"Yes, and you're Gloria?"

"Yes, I'm Gloria." Gloria gazed at her altogether too steadily. As carelessly as possible Arlie picked up an *Atlantic Monthly* and yawned.

"Oh, you read the *Atlantic*, do you?"

"Often, do you?" Arlie looked up, beginning to gather confidence.

Gloria, caught at a disadvantage with her *Saturday Evening Post*, raised the magazine to continue her running inspection of it. "Just when in May were you and Herb married?" Gloria asked. "Mother didn't tell me the date . . . or else I've forgotten it."

"May fourth."

"Rather sudden, wasn't it?"

Arlie winced. "That depends on how you look on it, I guess." Each raised her magazine and Gloria recrossed her legs.

"As far as that goes," Gloria resumed, "I guess a good many things will depend on how they're looked at."

"Will depend, or *do*?"

"Both." They turned their pages simultaneously. "Personally," Gloria continued, "I think that Herb was too young to marry, but of course, if—" Fluttering pages finished the sentence.

"Yes," said Arlie, "of course," and turned back to the first pages of the *Atlantic*, whereupon Gloria looked up coldly, decisively tilting her dark, thrust-out, handsome face. "And he's much too young," she added, "to be a father."

"It *is* too bad."

Gloria flicked over another page; Arlie fluttered a dozen in a white arc.

"I hope," said Gloria, "that Herb can get settled in something nice. Mother says he's talking of a garage or a Ford agency, or something of the kind."

"Yes, he's gone to Haley today to look into one."

"I hope you won't encourage him in *that*."

"I'll try not to."

"You see, we all have to help Herb. I can see that already. It's going to be a fearful responsibility, a family and all."

"Yes," Arlie answered, "I thought it was. I was glad to get Herb's help." They had finished their magazines and flopped them over at the same instant, whereupon Gloria tossed hers on the table and folded her hands.

"Seriously, though, it *is* a responsibility, a big one. And I think myself that Herb has been awfully decent about the whole thing. It didn't seem to me that there was any need of his marrying you at all, if you want to know what *I* think. That happens constantly—and the girl goes to a hospital and has her child adopted. . . ."

At first, as Gloria spoke these words, Arlie became unaware of her and vividly aware, in memory, of Mrs. Shuman. Perhaps this was what she had been thinking and regretting all the time, even though she had seemed to love the baby and had tried, that evening on the porch, to reach across the bleakness to her, the baby's mother. Then Gloria emerged in her handsome solidity and Arlie longed for Herb, to see him appear in the doorway and come to her protectingly to confirm the rightness of their marriage and their son, and to scoff at adoption. But he didn't come and she had to speak: "Yes," she said, "I know *some* girls do. But I didn't even think of it, and I wouldn't have," she ended in a flare, "if I had!"

"I didn't say *you* should have. I just said that it's often done, and that the fact that Herb didn't make you do it seems to me awfully decent of him, just as I said. It isn't, you know, as if your . . . well, place in life was the same as his. If it had been, the whole thing would have been different. It wouldn't have happened."

"It wouldn't have happened?" Arlie looked her question as well as asked it. "How do you mean?"

"Well . . . it just wouldn't . . . I don't know why. You'd have been married right away, or something."

Arlie stared at her. "I don't see why."

"Oh well," Gloria rose, "let's not talk about it. It's

all done, anyway. Where's the baby? Haven't you named it yet?"

"He's upstairs, asleep. We haven't named him because we haven't found the right name."

"Why don't you call him 'Jeffrey'?"

"We hadn't thought of that. It might do. I'll tell Herb."

"Come on," insisted Gloria, "I want to see him. We'll be careful not to wake him."

As Gloria preceded her down the room Arlie inspected her more closely, admiring her well-built form, larger and firmer than her own, the ankles, large but shapely in their silk stockings and pumps, and the assured poise of the head. She felt altogether too slight and awkward as she followed, but drew some consolation from her motherhood and the sense of milk tingling in her breasts, and immediately drooped abjectly: her motherhood was precisely what was wrong.

If not superiority, at least a degree of equality possessed her, however, when Gloria woke the baby with an awkward movement and he began to whimper, curling his lower lip pathetically before crying. Gloria sat silent on the radiator by the window while Arlie nursed him, and when, after a time, they did talk again, it was about the house, Bright Valley generally, Lawson, and the efficiency of Mrs. Gardewine.

5

At dinner Gloria absorbed most of the time, relating her recent adventures with her friends at the lake, and receding through those to the events of the school year, sorority activities, chatter about courses. Arlie turned with relief to Mr. Shuman.

"Well, Arlie," he said, "how's Squggins tonight? Any colic?"

"No—that'll come about two in the morning," she smiled.

"You haven't started him on the alphabet, have you?"

"Not yet. Next week will be soon enough, don't you think? Or maybe you meant the letters in soups?"

"Oh yes, certainly."

It was thus that they always talked, and Arlie saw now for the first time—with Gloria there for contrast—the extent of his condescension to her.

Before Mrs. Gardewine brought the dessert Arlie had to fly to the baby, who was crying lustily. When she returned Mr. Shuman had left the table and Gloria and her mother, lingering over dessert, were quite too clearly changing the subject. The transparency of it allowed a bitter light of loneliness to strike through at her. She finished her meal in flushed silence, and went early to bed. When the little silver clock on the dresser marked three o'clock and she was putting the bottle of catnip and fennel in its place for the fourth time, Herb's car roared up the driveway. She lay waiting to hear his step, which soon sounded cautiously on the stairs. Then, very slowly and gently, the door opened and his tall form stole across the room to the baby's bed.

"Careful, Herb," she whispered. "I just got him to sleep. He's had an awful colic."

Tip-toeing to her bed he sat down. "I just wanted to see the little duffer. Got to thinking about him coming home. Anything wrong but the colic?"

"No, I guess not. My milk may be a little bit off. It's been hard without you. I thought you weren't coming till noon tomorrow—or today I guess it is."

"Nope, I didn't like the place, wanted to get out of it. No pep. What's wrong with your milk?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's been sorta hard—Gloria came home."

"Oh, did she? That's right though. How'd you like her?"

"I don't know. . . . She thought I ought to of gone to a hospital and had the baby adopted."

"Hell!" he exclaimed.

"Sh—you'll wake him. . . . She wants him called Jeffrey. Do *you* like that name, Herb?"

"God, no! She's dippy. Probably got a case on some guy named Jeffrey. Leave her to me."

She drew him closer. "I wish you'd take me with you next time you go."

"I couldn't do that very well, with the baby."

"No, I suppose not. But can't we get away somewhere, a house of our own, and all?"

Herb placed a very comforting arm under her upraised head.

"I got a little plan, old girl. I'll tell you about it tomorrow, after I spring it on dad. . . . And it's better to stay here till you get your strength back."

"But I have already, Herb, all I need. And I want to be alone, with you."

"Not any more than I do, kid. This 'getting your strength back' isn't all it's cracked up to be, in my opinion. Just how long is it going to take, anyway?"

She snuggled her head closer and spoke thickly. "I—I feel all right now, Herb."

He tossed her back suddenly and roughly, and her face lay exposed.

"Do you mean—tonight?"

She nodded. Whereupon the baby stirred, whimpered, and began to cry. Arlie leapt out of bed to go to him, but had no more than reached his side than the door into Herb's room banged shut behind her, echoing explosively on the silence of the night. It was four o'clock before the baby was fundamentally asleep again and she could lie down to the uninterrupted tumult of dreams.

CHAPTER XIII

ORANGE STICKS

I

ARLIE and Herb breakfasted late and alone, and Arlie returned upstairs to give the baby his bath. Gloria intruded on the last of that ritual, and despite Arlie's absorption in her task chatted very graciously.

"After you get him asleep come on in my room, and we'll visit. I want to know you better, and I have to do my nails," Gloria said, examining them. "They're in frightful shape. Will you, dear?"

"It may be some time before I can, he's so fretful now it's getting hot," Arlie answered. Yet she went, able to hold herself back no more than she could have kept her tongue from an aching tooth, for she wanted to discover, if she could, the darkest opinions Gloria might be holding.

But Gloria's talk was principally of manicuring. "I was fifteen or sixteen, *anyway*, before I realized how important it is for a woman to be particular—about everything. I didn't use to wash my hair over once a month, or brush it more than once a day. Maybe a whisk or two at night. But now I never think of not brushing it for twenty minutes, at least. It's helped, too."

Arlie glanced at Gloria's glossy black piles. She, too, would do better—twenty minutes regularly.

"It's so easy to get slovenly." Gloria inspected the

rosy glaze of a finger nail and buffed it again. "There was a girl in the sorority who just didn't use anything but a file, just a metal file, until she was a Senior. I don't know *how* she got in. Imagine—not using orange sticks till one's twenty-two!"

Arlie wondered where Herb's finger-nail clip was; she had occasionally used it, or a toothpick, when the clip could not be found. She had been very careful, too, when she had seen Herb's frequent use of the clip.

"It shows, I think, what advantages one has, where one *is* in life, you know."

"I suppose it does," Arlie assented. "I hadn't thought of it—much." ("Where one *is* in life"—that is, "one's place in life.") What was the connection between orange sticks and virtue?)

"I've always said," Gloria continued, "though I guess mother said it first, that a woman who doesn't make the most of her person doesn't have the right to one. She gets to have no personality, no poise, you know."

"Um-hmm. (Arlie wondered if she had a "personality.") Maybe fifteen minutes a day would be enough for her hair, especially since she had a baby to look after.)

"Mother gave me this set when I started to college."

"It's an awfully nice one."

"It's getting sort of shabby now. But it does. . . . Why don't you make Herb give you one?"

"Oh well, there are so many things, you know, and the baby's quite an expense. I haven't so much time, either, to be monkeying around."

"Monkeying around! . . . I don't call this 'Monkeying around. It's work, that's what it is. But it's work that has to be done."

(Ten minutes would suffice admirably for her hair.)

"Oh, of course," Arlie said hastily. "I didn't mean *that*. I just meant that . . . well, with me there are so

many things that I have to do first. I couldn't possibly spend twenty minutes on my hair if I were keeping house too. Here I can, all right, there's only the baby. And I do lots of that sort of thing."

"You do?" Gloria was casually both affirmative and sceptical.

"Yes, and I want to be particular about the baby, too. But I know when I'm keeping house it'll be different. I'll have to let something slide."

"I don't see why. It's all in having system. Now Marion Chichester—you don't know her, of course—but she married a lawyer in Cedar Rapids. You ought to see her house. Neat as a pin, and her baby's healthy, and she keeps up—in everything. Reads just volumes. But she's just as neat herself as she can be."

"Dad used to work in Cedar Rapids," Arlie said.

Later in the day she overheard Mrs. Shuman and Gloria. "Well, mother," Gloria was saying, "I asked her to come in and visit with me while I did my nails, so we could get acquainted better, you know. I talked about taking pains with oneself—just like you used to. I was as diplomatic as I could be. But I don't think it did much good. Like water on a duck's back, it was. Do you suppose we can do Anything? Oh, mother!"

Arlie caught only the sigh that prefaced Mrs. Shuman's response before she fled upstairs as lightly as possible, sick at heart. "Oh, mother!" The words quavered in her through the day. When she went down to lunch, however, her nails were immaculate, but when she went to bed she did not even braid her hair.

2

The baby, whom they had not yet named, became a refuge for Arlie in the days that followed, and during that time it was as if strange crystals broke in her, one

by one, until she was flooded with a need for him, a desire to care for him that made of every restrained impatience a growing love. Roused by a cry in the sleep-sodden middle of the night she tended the baby without a word of even inner protest, as if by so doing she was making up to him some element denied herself. It had not been so after the birth. Then she had beheld him as if beyond an invisible glass of alienation, the cause, though an innocent one, of her long trouble, but whom it was futile to blame; whom it was even pitiful not to love. At the time she could not love; she could only wonderingly handle, hold him close, and try—vainly—to think him close and hers. That, he was only now becoming. Slowly but persistently through a dissolving mist of unfamiliarity he took a chubby definiteness and a place of his own.

She would catch him to her bared breast in a seizure of need and a desperate realization that she could never again completely surround him with herself, enveloping him wholly through her body in a love she had never given when he had been within it. No caresses could narrow the separation widening with the days.

3

Gloria, in the wide bright weeks of July, began another attack, first reading the little green book by Holt on *The Care and Feeding of Children*. Other books followed, each read exhaustively, until she could set against each other the contradictory conclusions of the authorities. She was a living *Sic et Non*. She read, too, all the treatises on pregnancy that she could find, and would come frequently to Arlie's room to check up the facts, hinting gently at first, and then flat-footedly questioning in tones that were boldly casual and disinterested.

'At times Arlie responded frankly, but usually found it difficult to be more than monosyllabic as Gloria dissected her own physiological future on her sister-in-law's cadaver. When Arlie tried instead to speak of present things, Gloria invariably began to criticize the routine, or lack of it, of the baby's care. Several times as they discussed the proper methods their words were edged; usually Arlie had to retreat to a sullen defence of a mother's intuition, and Gloria turned the pages of Holt in a flutter of refutation and a triumph of citation. The major dispute was over the wisdom or unwisdom of nursing the baby whenever he cried for the breast. In the end he was put on regular hours during the day, but variations still disturbed the night. More than once Arlie was grateful for what regularity had been achieved, though she would never have acknowledged it to Gloria.

4

Herb kept discreetly on the outskirts of the argument. At night he was willing that Arlie nurse the baby into silence; at other times what happened did not so nervously matter, since he spent his days in town.

On his return from Haley he had gone to his father with the plan he had spoken of to Arlie. He proposed that he learn banking at the Lawson State Bank and later go to some larger town. His father agreed and he had started work. Later, they planned, Herb should go to the First National Bank in Finley, sixty miles east, in which Mr. Shuman held a majority of the stock and where the elderly cashier was expecting to retire in a year or two. It was hoped that Herb would be ready to take his place. There was a possibility, too, of going to Cedar Rapids or to Des Moines.

In the second week of his work Herb drove into the yard in a new Ford, honking for Arlie. "Why, Herb," she called from the window, "whose car's that?"

"Mine," he answered with a grin. "That is, ours, I mean. Dad gave it to me. Said it was too much bother running in to get me, and we'd need it in Finley, anyway, if we go there. Come on down and let's beat it for a little."

When they had driven away, with the baby sleeping in profound innocence in Arlie's arms, ownership mastered them. They grinned at each other ecstatically, neither finding a word for a long three miles.

"It's the first thing really our own, isn't it, Herb?"

"It sure is. Of course it's only a Ford, but I guess the damn' little thing isn't so bad after all. We'll get our Packard in time, old girl. And think how handy it'll be for me now. No hurrying to get out of the bank; I can wait till I finish."

Silence followed as they flew past corn and pasture and grove.

"It's like old times, isn't it?" Arlie said at last.

"How do you mean—riding around together?"

"Um-hmm, only Pansy and Dolly ain't—arent' here."

"Nope," he answered soberly, "no Pansy, no Dolly. Just us and the kid."

"We ought to name him, Herb."

"Might call him Ford," he suggested. "Not bad, is it—Ford Shuman?"

"Oh, be sensible! I'd thought more of Peter, after your father."

"Naw—dad hates the name too much himself."

"Well, 'Herbert' then?"

"Hell no! No kid of mine's going to be called 'Herbert!' But we got plenty of time. No hurry about it, at all. I'm going to let her out a little. I don't care if I do burn her out. Hold on to the kid."

In the evenings Herb studied various books on banking that his mother had ordered for him. At first he had scoffed at the idea of learning anything helpful from books his mother would choose, but when he had looked them over his interest had been attached, with the result that he read them thoroughly and ordered more. As he studied he began to plan and to explain to Arlie various financial processes—thoroughly incomprehensible. When the talk turned to what he would do in Finley she brought the subject gradually around to their whole mode of life there, and so to the house they would have and its furnishings.

There followed a miraculous evening with the thick catalogues of the mail order houses, in which Arlie marked the articles she desired: the range, the linoleum for the kitchen, the dining-room set, the beds, the mattresses. Herb read the descriptions of all of these, overruling some of Arlie's choices, concurring in others. But at the last he had marred the whole evening by suggesting that while it was nice to pick from the catalogue, of course they'd have to buy at home. Then they'd be sure to get what they wanted.

"But Herb," she protested, "we can't go to Finley and start buying there. They wouldn't have some things we'd *need*. And I don't see what difference it makes to Finley whether we buy in Lawson or Chicago."

"Well," he announced heavily, "it's the principle of the thing. Then, too, we can't get what we want at Sears, Roebuck. Take that dining-room set. It's too jiggly and all. We want something quieter and not so flashy."

Arlie pouted. The only "principle" that she could see was that they were not to buy of a Chicago mail order house, and the projected rapture of turning the pages and comparing the merits of the dishpan at 89 cents with the one at \$1.18 was dulled.

Mrs. Shuman helped a little the next day when she took Arlie to the attic to inspect the furniture stored in dusty order. Relics of her own former days sat there abandoned: a veneered bird's-eye maple bedroom suite; a metal bed that had once been Gloria's; a shaving mirror with a red cherry frame and shelves, and an old marble-topped table with curly legs.

"Oh!" said Arlie; and could hardly leave the place for luncheon.

At her mother-in-law's suggestion she drew up long lists of articles they would need, first checking off those already in the attic, and estimating the prices of the rest. The work was thoroughly done and Mrs. Shuman approved it.

Then came ordering and assembling, a room being set aside for the purpose. Into this Arlie had the men move from the attic the pieces she intended to use, and there, in the hot mornings while Herb was at the bank, she scraped and painted and polished.

"I want everything spandy," she explained to Gloria, who often came in to watch. "But I'm glad, too, to have some of them look old. It won't look . . . all newness, you know. Like a store."

"Yes," Gloria assented, "they'll have associations—for Herb, anyway."

Arlie felt that a door had been shut somewhere. But, she reflected, the long hours that were preparing the furniture would give even her some associations, once their home was established. What remained to trouble her was the fact that she and her family were giving nothing toward the household that was every day becoming more vivid. She realized, suddenly, that Mrs. Shuman had accepted that condition without a word or a suggestion that any one other than herself was to furnish anything. She had known, but had never really thought, of the agreement between Mr. and Mrs. Shuman whereby she was to

outfit the house and baby, and he was to arrange Herb's position in the bank, giving him enough stock to assure him an interest and something of an income outside his salary. Arlie did not like that agreement now; she wanted something, at least, to come from the Gelstons.

It was not until they checked over the list of bedding that she found her way. Then she recalled the stuffy quantity of quilts and comforters that her mother had retained, practically unused. Herb should take her to Coon Falls.

6

On Sunday morning they put the baby on a pillow in a clothes basket, wedged the basket into the rear of the car, and started.

The day was beautiful with a hot Sabbatical serenity that further subdued even the quiet of the countryside. The corn, high above the barbed wire, opened its drooping palms. Fields of clover blossom succeeded, and their amethyst levels, smoothed by the light, paled toward the abrupt blue of the sky. Overhead was an intense, corn-colored sun, and a low breath of honey flowed to them.

As they drove they were silent, and as the honey-scented silence flew with them it became for Arlie an emotionally rich quiet. Her former worries had dropped away, present worries were hushed under her preoccupation with their plans, and she was conscious of marriage.

Shortly she would have a house of her own. Already she had more money to spend than she had dreamed of in former days. And Herb was now her husband in reality. Through a slow crescendo of developing knowledge she was coming to possess with him formless, invaluable fundamentals that lay about their common life as powerful and unseen as changes of atmospheric pressure. Thrust forward from all this upon a filled moment she was riding, in their own automobile, to

lord it over the circumstance of the denying past.

Far off a mist of dust hung above the road; through the mottling obscurity cattle crept into view, followed by men on horseback. As they neared the swinging confusion Herb sent the car into a side road and the herd pounded by, heads levelled to the line of their backs, rushing with dull inquisitiveness down the opposite road. One of the horsemen yipped after them.

"Feeders," Herb observed. "Must be McRobert's. Going to be a lot of money in them. Dad'll have some along by next Sunday."

The powerful onrush had passed and the road was clearing, but the confusion roared distantly in Arlie's ears: power going up the road . . . to be fed . . . to be fattened . . . comfort . . . and comfort might become more, something she didn't have . . . something she wasn't.

7

It was a little disappointing, when they drove into Coon Falls and drew up in front of the Gelston house, to see only her father on the front porch, a Sunday paper scattered about his rocker and his suspenders dangling from his trousers.

He looked up from his paper in answer to Arlie's "Hoo-hoo," and as they approached the house he rose to meet them, slipping his suspenders into place and standing on the top step as gaunt and awkward as ever, but somehow strange.

"Why, pa, you got glasses! When'd you get 'em?"

"H'lo, Arlie, how are you? 'Most a month I've had 'em now. How d'you do, Mr. Shuman." He extended his hand.

"Now don't call Herb *Mr.* Shuman, pa. He's Herb, aren't you, Herb? You take the baby a minute. Where's ma, in the house?"

"Just sit down, won't you? Take that chair. I'll bring out some more. . . . Your ma went some place. She'll be back though."

Herb sat down with the baby in his arms; Oliver dragged chairs out to the porch and Arlie went inside.

The hall and the dining-room greeted her with the drab patience of years, and outside the kitchen door the patch of ground bared and blackened by the out-flung dish-water showed its old ragged contours and the same dirtied potato peelings. She went upstairs to her old room.

That, which she had expected to find the same—if she had expected anything, and the change would have let her discover that she had—was altered toward emptiness. The drawers of the dresser, after sticking, gave out suddenly to disclose their boards. A dust of strangeness filmed the top. Grayness hung over the whole room, which she faced wonderingly, trying to think back the covers on the thinly striped, naked mattress. The room was empty now: empty of dreams and hope and misery, a forlorn little room . . . room stuck on the room beneath; winds would beat against it . . . exposed to all the winds, and to the corrosion of its own blind silence. She stood there wanting dumbly to cry; but instead she closed the door softly behind her and went down.

In the dining-room she saw the bud vases that she had purchased months ago sitting in the confusion of the sideboard, dusty and empty too.

8

"Did ma go to Horacks', pa?" she asked as she joined the men on the porch.

"I guess so. Usually she's there."

"Don't you think that's a fine boy? Here, give him to me."

"He sure is. I was just telling Mr. Shuman, though,

that you'd ought to name him. Going on his fourth month, ain't he?"

"Four months in September. But why do you keep on calling Herb mister for, pa?"

Her father looked at her sidewise through his glasses—almost timidly; swallowed, but said nothing. Herb spoke up: "Who do you think the boy looks like?"

"Well, I don't know. He's almost too young to tell, ain't he?"

"Do you think maybe he looks like Arlie?"

Oliver considered. "Well, I rather guess I do, sir."

The "sir" annoyed Arlie, but why she couldn't tell. Then her mother was seen coming from Horacks'. She failed to respond to Arlie's wave, and as she came up the walk glanced half nervously, half appraisingly, at Herb.

"Gee, I was afraid we was going to miss you, ma. And I needed to see you about some things."

"Hello, Mrs. Gelston." Herb rose from his chair. Mrs. Gelston extended her arm as if they were shaking hands with difficulty across a creek; throughout she sustained an air mingled of flabby dignity and defence.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Shuman."

"I'm glad to see *you*, Mrs. Gelston." (The "Mrs." in Herb's mouth was easy and familiar and right.) "Everything fine with you, is it?"

"Why, yes sir. I guess it is." A nervous laugh. "Oliver, you might give Mr. Shuman a good chair instead of that thing we keep on the porch."

"Well, I offered him this, but—"

"I'm on the porch, all right, I guess," Herb put in. Mrs. Gelston turned to Arlie. "Arlie, do you have lots of mi—lots of—everything you need for the baby, I mean?"

"Why yes. Don't be afraid to say milk before Herb. He knows I nurse the baby. And I have everything I need, too, besides. What I want, though, is some blank-

ets and quilts and comforters. We're going to have a house of our own in October. Over in Finley it is. Herb's going to be cashier in the bank there. And you got a lot of bedding you're not using and I want some."

When they went in to sort through the supply Mrs. Gelston was lavish. "I don't need this," she said, "and I ain't even opened this Irish chain lace, except to air it, for five years." So they were piled ready to be carried to the car.

Then her mother quizzed Arlie on her recent life, on Mrs. Shuman, Mr. Shuman, Gloria. The clothes Arlie wore she examined with care, fingering the organdy of the dress and feeling the silk stockings on Arlie's ankles. "My, that's good stuff," she pronounced.

"I thought so," Arlie said, and tried to say it as indifferently as possible, looking away from her mother's eyes, that were inquiring how far Arlie had advanced in finding such luxury usual.

9

At night Arlie rested contentedly after the completion of the day. Herb was dropping farther into sleep at her side, beginning his light snore. She was glad, even in that lethargic moment, because of his uncouth strength beside her, in whose rough grasp she had lain, and who was, after the female cloying of her life, an exacting fundamental. She moved to touch him.

CHAPTER XIV

FINLEY

I

IN October Arlie, Herb, and the baby—finally named Gerald—moved to Finley. Three days after they had shipped their household goods they drove in their Ford between pale fields and rich trees thinning before winter, and through towns becoming gray, until they reached their home.

Herb had driven over in September to rent a house, which, with the help of Burr, the cashier in the bank, had been easy to find—a modern bungalow on the edge of town. He had also hired a woman to help Arlie with the settling.

They found the woman seated on the steps of the bungalow, but the goods were still at the station. By noon the procrastinating drayman had bestirred himself and work began. Because everything except curtain rods had been remembered they were comfortable by night and were really established by the end of the week.

Even in November their unconscious customs had begun to set and were falling into the narrow patterns of married life. Already the new days were merging indistinguishably into the conglomerate of time behind them. Herb was finding his work at the bank more usual and Arlie was becoming acquainted; there were calls, and calls returned. On Sunday they went to church, leaving

the baby in the charge of a neighbor girl, Gracia Wentling. Church was not a matter of special desire or conviction with either ; they went because going was expected and because Herb wished to identify himself with the town. As for Arlie, she never thought of her conversion, of Murkleman, of Mrs. Holcomb. She knew, when she was asked one time, that she did not want to join the church, and that she would never want to join. What she did want was to belong to the circle with whom the church was a rather meaningless form of Sabbatical activity, like the reading of the Chicago Sunday *Tribune*. She went to one and read the other.

As the weeks seemed to secure them she grew uncomfortable: there was more to be lost now than ever, and if only one person in the town should know of Gerald's birth, or even one person from Coon Falls pass through town, it would not be long before everybody . . . Yet she saw more directly now, more realistically. Even fear disintegrated before time and contact. Time was longer than one thought: when the bend came there was always another stretch of road. She knew that she could face even an informed Finley, but Finley uninformed was happier, looser.

2

"What you do today?" Herb asked one November evening as he carved the steak.

"I called on Mrs. Weaver for one thing."

"Remember your cards?"

"Of course I did. What do you take me for?"

"Well, you didn't at first. Mother told me to remind you about them. I wouldn't of thought of it myself, probably."

"Oh, she did, did she? Well, you can just tell her I'm not such a dunce as she and the rest of your family take me for. . . . I want more gravy than that."

"That enough? . . . You don't need to get mad. I didn't mean anything. It's just that . . . oh, well."

As they ate, Arlie's indignation was quieted; partly she had been hungry. "Just what does Mr. Weaver do, Herb?" she asked presently.

"Some sort of cheap lawyer, I guess. Makes his living on insurance and collections."

"Is he well off?"

"Hell no! Not out of debt on his education yet, Burr says."

"Then I guess *she* hasn't any right to be snippy."

"What did she say?"

Arlie drank some water before replying. "Well, she was sorta feeling around. 'When was we married?' she asked, and then later, 'What was the baby's name?' But she didn't catch me. Only afterwards when I was going she poked at Gerald till she made him cry and said she thought it was just fine of young couples to have children early—'so *very* early' she said, and sorta smiled.

"Yes, and then went on to talk of how she and Mr. Weaver hoped they could have a baby. She just loved children, she said."

"I'll bet. Well . . . let her talk . . . and then let hubby come around to raise some kale. I'll show 'em where to get off at. . . . But how could she know?"

"How can *I* tell? I don't know that she does, really, only it was sorta funny."

The incident had been souring in her mind ever since she had returned home, and Mrs. Weaver's smile had persisted until it had broadened to a malevolent grin. But as the weeks succeeded and brought no recurrence of intended smiles Arlie began to breathe again and to forget.

The winter deepened, sending a silence with its snow that made the more infrequent noises clearer and whitely distinct. Just so her new life rang out above

the dull plain of the old: there were the comfortable bungalow; the good meals she could now cook; the increasing plumpness of Gerald; the discovery, in the bridge club she and Herb had joined, that she might become a good card-player; the long evenings after Gerald was asleep and the dishes were washed when she and Herb talked or read.

For she was reading now. When Mrs. Shuman had insisted, Arlie had been reluctant; but with the pressure removed she found she wanted the books she had ignored, and wrote her mother-in-law for a package of them. More were added at Christmas time, and with great difficulty she ordered some herself through the local drug store, having read of them in the *Outlook* and a Des Moines newspaper. By February she had read all of Winston Churchill, and had sat up nights with Rider Haggard's *She* and *Allan Quartermain*. Chesterton's *Club of Queer Trades* enthralled her, but turning to his *Heretics* she gave it up after forty pages to read *Kipps* and *Tono-Bungay*. She was crying when she finished the account of Kipps in the London hotel, and after one more book by Wells, which interested her mildly, she went with Herb on a prolonged debauch of O. Henry. Conrad, whom Mrs. Shuman had recommended to Arlie without having read him, proved too tropically mysterious, and she closed his pages with the impression that in Conrad's world everything was purple or immobile, and often both. Shaw's *Man and Superman* perplexed her; she could not comprehend Don Juan's motives in choosing the heaven depicted by the Statue.

3

"I hope Gerald's asleep," Arlie said as she and Herb stumbled through snowdrifts gleaming under the electric lights. They turned in at the bungalow, which was lifted

into brown prominence by the stilled white waves on the ground.

"He'll be all right," Herb affirmed thickly, stamping the snow from his shoes.

The inside of the house was a suppressed shout of warmth. Gerald was asleep, and had been asleep for the last three hours, they were informed by Gracia Wentling, the flaxen-haired girl who had cared for him. Herb went at once to the furnace and Arlie sat by the register. After one had been inside for a few minutes it wasn't so warm after all.

"Believe me," Herb said as he washed his hands at the kitchen sink on his return from the furnace, "these Finleyites sure don't know how to get up a dance. Never had such a dull time in my life. Jesus!"

"Those college guys make me tired," Arlie supplemented.

"Same here." Herb had also seated himself by the register. "It's no fun when all the live muts stay in a bunch by themselves."

"I suppose you wanted to dance with the girls."

"Not any more'n you did with the boys. . . . Well, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. That married crowd is all right, I suppose, but I don't like to dance with 'em. They're . . . oh, I don't know. You just feel sure, though, that they're going home just like us."

"It's an old barn of a hall. They got a lot better floor in Lawson; Coon Falls, too, for that matter."

"Do you remember that dance in Coon Falls, Herb? The Fourth it was, when I met you?"

"Yeh . . . let's see. Who'd I take—Marvel? Mother was saying that she's going to be a nurse, out in Omaha. She wasn't so bad. Good dancer, too."

"Gee, I was jealous of her that night. Seemed to me

she had everything I wanted, a nice name, good clothes, and a—handsome fellow."

Herb grinned. "And now you got 'em yourself—the handsome fellow especially—you can't see why you was ever so jealous?"

"No, it's not that. . . ."

"Huh, what is it, then?" His voice held the edge of other possible questions.

"Oh, I don't know. It's all so long ago. Five years it seems like. My, I thought you were a good dancer. Of course, you are. . . ."

"Um-hmm. Thanks. But what it is you're thinking about, back of all this palaver?"

What was she thinking? No thought at all, only restless quaverings of old tunes that no one sang any more. . . .

The ache in her back was spreading to lassitude, to an overpowering inability to rise, to think, even to speak. All had been different on that night; more had been held within it. The remote flash of a dance had lit every horizon, a summer lightning that was gone. She couldn't say anything to Herb about the dim way she remembered. She was too tired to say it, even if she could.

Herb was going to insist. "What's back of all this talk?"

How to rise through the effectual weight of water upon her? She could not . . . and then was talking. "I don't *know*, Herb. It's just that I was thinking about . . . what marriage does to people. They get pasty."

"Pasty? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, can't you see?"

"Come on, you're dippy for sleep."

In the middle of the night she turned to him, a heretic seeking the communion. It was given as penance, as a punishment that hurt and saved, and because it saved

became a cutting physical light in which doubts were burned away. Soggy with sleep she groped back to the bed, felt mechanically to see that Gerald was covered, and sank again beside Herb, who was already riding the slow rhythm of sleep. Blackness stole from everywhere to enclose her, and through blackness she sank, life put out, to the hard darkness, whence to the recall of day she would bring back no dreams. Sleep became infinite.

4

The dirty interval between winter and spring settled upon Finley as an abomination. It was crude and imperfect as birth, and irritable with winds of false warmth. Arlie splashed out of town on desperate walks, all to fight out something that was obscurely choking. It did not come as a struggle at first.

Snug within the winter she had lived her life fully, reverting from her books to service unlit by reflection; to an animal contentment with her house, her husband, her baby, herself. Spring wakened harshness in her; she snapped at Herb and slapped Gerald with little provocation. Herb was usual as the food she cooked, and that she too might be becoming so to him was perhaps the fact she fled—up the abrupt hills and along the roads soaring level above the valley.

One of the walks began, toward its end, to bring surcease from the dark, inner grope. The wind, shouting high above the fields that were graying into the first black of spring, struck at her individually. She came clean. For a quarter of a mile farther she broke the wind, and returning found the earth firmer, drier. She was going back to Herb, to Gerald, to Finley—a mess of blocks and angles, brown mass and isolated flat white awry upon the ground. Overhead the sky's gray indifference was varied in the southwest by milky translucence, behind

which lay intolerable light. Beyond and below were order, warmth, the touch of used furniture, the hard, new, plastery smell of the back entry. Her own house, at least, where waited what had seemed to her the consummation of life, and where yet lay all she felt she was to have. Beyond that was—only itself again, in the key of another place. She should be satisfied. She was. And the wind came clean as knives.

Yet at dinner:

“What you been doing this afternoon?”

“Went for a walk.”

“Poor day for a walk. What you do with Gerald?”

“Left him with Gracia. I wanted to think, even if it was a punk day. But I couldn’t . . . too windy.”

“What you talking about? Honest, Arlie, sometimes I don’t get you.”

“Don’t try.”

“But—” The “but” poised, hung there like a blunt thing, obtuse, invulnerable. She wanted, suddenly and inexplicably, to hit him, his word, Gerald, anything. She only let her hand fall heavily to the table, spilling water from her overfull tumbler. Her nerves whined at the defect. “Shut up, can’t you! I told you not to try. Look there—!”

“Why Arlie!”

She gave in, apologized, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him; and later, for the first time, refused him.

All the next morning she sang at her work, poked lavish and loving fun at Gerald while he cried throughout his bath, and whisked her work away with manipulations never before half so efficient. At lunch she was alert and laughing, kissed Herb an effusive good-bye, and in the afternoon read racingly, forgetful of Herb, baby, and self. At four o’clock she threw down her book. She was too happy to read. If only she could stop to listen

she felt that she might hear music playing distantly. But an abounding energy drove her on.

At night she went to her bedroom in terror at finding her valiance gone. Sleep remained, something to be done—almost somewhere—away from here—to go. She rushed into bed as if she were boarding a moving train, expecting to be rushed immediately into sleep, but only to lie there in inert disappointment that the train was after all not going to move.

5

By inserting the handle of a brush she adjusted the angle of the mirror. Unquestionably her face was plumper and colorful. A year of married life, of what must be happiness, had not passed without deposit. She was aware of change. Also, unemotionally, she was aware of what had been happening just a year ago. She must have been waiting for Dr. Taylor at about this time of day, she was not sure of hours. At present her mother was miles distant, puttering futilely in the kitchen with yesterday's unwashed dishes. Exactly a year ago she had not thought of marriage, and a year ago plus twelve hours, she had been married, the room had become quiet, and she was entered on what had led to this: this house, this room, this mirror. And herself sitting before it, wondering if rouge would help her color or if she had better leave it as it was, if perhaps the blue of her forward eyes wasn't all she should hope for. But if she brought her hair farther down on her forehead . . . there . . . her face gained . . . pungency? . . . piquancy? Piquancy was the word. Where had she read it? At present it was what she wanted to be but knew she wasn't. A good word, though. Her eyes became almost mysterious with her hair that way. But could anybody with freckles across the bridge of the

nose be mysterious? The winter should have bleached them. Then her nose might get credit for being straight and delicate. Lips could be brightened by rubbing them against the teeth. Mrs. Weaver used a lip-stick. They were better brightened. . . . She stared at the complete picture: the face that was a little thin even beneath its new plumpness. Were the eyes a little wild. . . . An alien bright face swayed there in the mirror, a light of ghostly unfamiliarity playing upon it, upon the lines that losing accustomedness were novel as an unknown face, with what hard, undiscoverable personality behind she could not tell, could not reach . . . a Face hung before her out of indistinguishable heights, deep as the sky in what is untouched and unknown. The defeat of nightmare, necessity of hopeless clutching vainly out toward the hardness and sureness of what has been and as a chasm is no more . . . that Face hers and not hers, her face seen as another might see it. Shock of softness, nothing . . . it was gone. She was clutching the top of the bureau, staring idiotically at only herself.

She walked to the window, but was still a little dizzy with the fumes as of a nightmare subsiding in her brain.

6

Gerald was hitching himself along the wall when Herb returned that evening and tossed him a package. "Let's see what you're good for, old boy. Come on, now, get busy." Gerald clawed at the wrappings, rolled it over, hit at it, picked it up again to hug to himself, and looked at his parents with blue-eyed solemnity.

"Come on, now," Herb insisted. "Open it up. If you can't do that on your first birthday you don't deserve what's in it."

"Oh, Herb," Arlie protested as she set the table, "open it for him yourself. He's too little."

"Bosh! Open it up, boy." Gerald blinked. "Open it, I tell you. Tear the paper. Show some life, can't you?" Gerald's lower lip quivered and drew in. "Open it!" Herb shouted. "Don't be a crybaby!" The lips parted with a gasping indrawal of breath and the infant red of the mouth exposed itself in a wide tense silence becoming tenser, until with the fullness of power restrained Gerald let go utterly in a nerve-shaking bellow, and his little form collapsed in a white huddle. The package rolled away.

"There, now you've done it!" Arlie rushed to Gerald with belligerent tenderness. "Scared him to death, poor little fellow. Of course he can't open it. On his birthday, too."

"Well, it was just some stuff I got *for* his birthday. How'd I know he was going to act that way? He opens things he shouldn't quick enough. Come on, old boy, buck up. See what's in the darned old thing. Daddy didn't mean to scare you. Look: a big red ball, and a rattle, and a thing-um-jig, and a monkey that climbs a string." Herb demonstrated the agility with which a red and green monkey hunched himself up a string, and Gerald's sobs stopped as if the circuit had been broken.

"I didn't mean to scare him, Arlie, honest I didn't," Herb explained as they ate. "I just thought it was time for him to begin to do a few things for himself."

"Oh well, it doesn't matter. He's all right now."

When time for dessert came Arlie reappeared from the kitchen. She bore a cake with a single pink candle in its centre shaking a minute gold petal of flame variously reflected from the white frosting. Gerald reached for the flame, its light like a desire in his eyes.

"See, he likes it! Oh, look quick!" Gerald had reached for the flame, felt its heat, withdrawn his hand, and was looking up, chubbily puzzled. "Isn't he funny? Now, baby, blow it out. Pooh! Mother'll do it for you.

There. Now you get the first piece, a great big little one!"

As they ate the cake and preserved peaches Herb's face sobered.

"Gee!" he said, "I didn't remember to get you anything. Do you mind if I don't till tomorrow?"

"Oh, I don't want anything," Arlie answered. "I got enough with you and the baby and all. And it's spring and we got the Ford and can't we be taking some long old rides again, like we used to?"

"Sure. Only I'd ought to remembered about more'n Gerald's presents. Funny I'd forget the other."

The doorbell rang.

"You go," she said, "and I'll whisk some of these things off."

Herb returned with Mrs. Wentling, Gracia's mother. "I just thought I'd run over to see how you young folks was getting along, and I wanted to ask Mrs. Shuman if she couldn't help us out on the church supper a little. A cake maybe. I've heard you make such good cakes, and there's a birthday cake right now . . . for the baby. My goodness, are you a whole year old, Gerald? Such a big boy too. Thanks, I will have a piece, though I just eat. . . . That's awfully good cake, Mrs. Shuman. You just got to make cakes for the supper."

Mrs. Wentling's mouth closed decisively on another large bite and her double chin under her smooth cheeks waggled a little as she munched. Her brown eyes commented at large upon the room and its furniture.

"I'd be glad to make a cake if mine would be good enough. I do have fair luck with cakes usually."

"I'd think so, making 'em like this. Gerald, you're sure a lucky boy to have a mother to make birthday cakes as good as this one. My, it's such a fine thing to begin early to have a family. Look at the Weavers. Not a chick. Just plain cowardice, I call it. And then

look at you folks. Here you got this fine boy and ain't been married over two or three years likely. Just how long have you been married, anyway?" She paused.

Herb looked at Arlie and Arlie looked at the table. "It'll be a year the fifteenth of July," she said. "Two years, I mean." She laughed. "How foolish of me. Of course it's two years, you know."

Herb said nothing, Arlie said no more, and Mrs. Wentling paused. Her eyes were indrawn as she calculated, almost audibly. "Anyway," she resumed, in the light of her subtractions, "you didn't wait long and that's right. . . . Gracious, Mrs. Shuman, I didn't mean to shock you. I thought you young folks was so frank about everything. It gets different, you know, with married people, especially as they get older. As I said to Edward . . ."

In ten minutes she was at the door, where she volubly persisted. "All right, Mrs. Shuman, I'll put you down on my list for two white cakes. It's *so* good of you, you know, to help out that way; and do run over. I get so lonesome sometimes."

Arlie closed the door. Herb, sunk in his chair, was smoking. Neither spoke for a minute. Then:

"Oh, Herb, do you suppose she does know, that everybody does?"

"How can I tell?"

"It's too much, when everything was so happy and all."

"Let'er know, damn her. I'm going to be cashier here in a year. Some of 'em'll be decent then."

"That won't prevent their knowing. And those you think you won't give money to will just talk all the worse. You won't see things."

"Oh hell, shut up!"

"Don't, don't! I got to have you to love me. I can't get along without you." She sat on the arm of his chair. "What *could* I do without you, Herb? Don't you see?"

She dropped herself across his lap and clung to his neck.

"Get off, you're too heavy."

"I'm not. You're just mad. Love me a little, Herb. . . . I love *you* so." His arms came around her and he kissed her. "I do you, Arlie." The embrace, her warm weight, the pressure of her breast, were incantations that stirred an answer. The ancient sting of tears hinted itself upon his eyes. He closed them and pressed her closer. "It's all right, old girl, we'll come through. You'll lord it over the whole damn' lot of Wentlings. Money talks better'n they do, and believe me, I'm going to have it. We'll be in Chicago in a year."

Shortly she raised herself and started clearing the table. "Would you help me with the dishes tonight?" she asked. "I haven't asked you for a long time, and I'm tired."

"Sure I'll help you."

The dishwashing was a process Arlie observed from a distance and through a distorting medium, as if not only her hands but every manipulation were performed in alien space, strangely close.

"There, that's all, Herb. Put the plates away and I'll tend to the rest. Thanks a lot, dear." The kitchen ritual.

In an hour they went to bed, and off and on all night Gerald cried. "It must be the cake; he really shouldn't have had any," Arlie thought as she gave him catnip and fennel.

"Can I do anything? What's the matter with him?" Herb blinked at her with a face colored sullenly with hard sleep.

"No, you can't do anything except go to sleep and not wake him. He's off now, I think."

Men could be very useless at times.

CHAPTER XV

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

I

SUMMER brought long evenings on the screened porch, rides in the Ford, and talk of a trip to Des Moines in the latter part of August. After the state fair they planned a week at the farm for the remainder of Herb's vacation. It was to be a good summer; it was already beginning to be good. The weeks after Mrs. Wentling's visit had brought no more cross-questioning, and the only after-effect was a lingering irritability that made Herb sullen on occasion; but when their acquaintances quite evidently wanted to become friends, their doubts, without being answered, tended to disappear.

It had been the Weavers who suggested the picnic for Saturday afternoon. Arlie was beginning to like Mrs. Weaver, who for all her hawk-like face and close eyes that blinked too much behind her eyeglasses, could still remember Gerald's weight and the number of his teeth, and exclaim at the spread-leg waddle that was his interpretation of walking. Mr. Weaver, with his curl of nose made too prominent by a slanting forehead and undersized chin, she tried to like because Herb found him at least companionable.

Saturday afternoon Arlie drove the Ford to the side of the bank and honked. Herb waved from the window his intention of "being out in a minute," but when he came there had to be another wait. Arlie had forgotten the butter.

"I'll run to the grocery," she said. "You watch Gerald."

On her way past Hatcher's Drug Store she glanced over the banked display of hair tonics in the window to see, centered in the midst of conflicting planes of window glass, of mirror inside and doubling reflections, a known figure bent over the soda fountain. The man turned as she looked back and she saw his face in a soft shock of familiarity. She knew that face well, but could not place it. The man's brows lifted in an arc of recognition, he smiled broadly and bowed into the intervening brick wall that closed her view. It was, it must be, some one from Coon Falls, but who? Streets, faces, and buildings of Coon Falls pressed forward, whirled, went out, charged again, as if to overwhelm and prevent her seeing that face in one sure setting.

"Yes, I want some . . . what was it, now?" she had to say to the grocery clerk. "I knew, just a minute ago," she apologized. "Just let me think."

That face she had seen often—had it been one coming to the Bijou? A stream of faces: fat, tall, dark, wrinkled, rouged, bland. . . .

"Was it potatoes, vegetables, cheese?"

"Butter! That's it, of course. How could I forget? A pound, please."

"Yes ma'am, and anything else?"

"No." It had been about the Bijou, that face, a grimacing part of those long months that were gone. She had wanted—passionately wanted—no one from Coon Falls to come to Finley. Was this person moving here, bringing his family? That would be the end of everything, almost.

"Thank you." She walked out with the carton of butter. She would whisk past the drug store to the Ford. Eyes on the ground she hurried.

"If it isn't Miss Gelston!" She had to look at the

hand thrust before her and follow the arm up to the face —Somers.

"Why Mr. Somers, how are you?"

"Fine, and how's yourself? I guess it isn't Miss Gelston any more, is it, or even Arlie? Mrs. Sherman, eh, isn't it?"

"No; Mrs. Shuman. My husband's in the bank here, assistant cashier."

"Oh—is he?" The brows rose again, and again came the smile. "Well, well, you're going up in the world a bit."

"Oh, I don't know"—coldly. "But how do you happen to be in Finley? Are you moving here, bringing your family?"

"Oh no, no. Just looking for a location. I thought of starting a show-shop here, but it's no go. You got a fairly live fellow here now, and he won't sell and the town won't stand two."

"No, I don't suppose so . . . I hope you find a good place. I know this wouldn't suit you. Good-bye, I got to hurry on. Mr. Shuman's waiting. I—I'm glad I saw you."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Shuman." Again the broad warm hand came out, and again the eyes gleamed under the versatile brows. "I'm mighty glad to see you again."

"Good-bye, good-bye." She was off now. "And remember me to Jessie. I hope she's all right now."

She thought that Somers started to speak, but did not stop to hear what he might be saying.

2

"Who was that guy you had to shake hands with so much?" Herb asked.

"I didn't shake hands more'n I had to. When a man puts out his hand that way what you going to do?"

"Well, who was he then?"

"It was Somers, from Coon Falls. I used to work for him in the Bijou. He's looking for another house. Old Tritchler's probably tired of having him sponge around."

"Is Tritchler the guy you told father you'd come to Lawson to do some business for?"

"Yes. . . . Did your father tell you?"

"Sure. Quite a yarn, he thought it was."

"Oh! Didn't he believe it?"

Herb smiled. "Well, I guess you got sorta mixed, didn't you?"

"I don't see why I should of. He told you, though?"

"Yep."

It hurt to have suspicions confirmed, even though she felt that Herb was using this to punish her for meeting Somers and thus reviving the old anxiety. But the consoling margin of uncertainty about her first encounter with Mr. Shuman had vanished. It had been a year and a half or more, and here she was, married to the son of the man who had not been fooled. Yet it hurt.

"Is this nut going to stay here?"

"No. He thinks Finley's too small for two shows."

"I'd think so!"

"He's a good showman, though, Somers is." She felt agreeably technical.

"Yes. I gathered that you thought he was."

"Oh, don't, Herb. Here come the Weavers. Let's not fight before them."

Because Gerald was already asleep Mr. and Mrs. Weaver got into the back seat together. It was better so, in a way, for Arlie did not need to talk as much as if she had been with Mrs. Weaver. For the first miles Mr. Weaver was busy shouting to Herb a long, laughter-punctuated account of how he had induced a farmer, one Jorgenson, to insure his life for five thousand dollars.

He was feeling very good about it. Arlie was glad he had succeeded: she didn't have to talk, and could give monosyllabic replies to the housekeeping questions Mrs. Weaver tried to ask.

The equable golden afternoon was enough, the scurry under the trees along the river, the darting along the green-millioned cornfields, the view from a hill road of the level horizon-filling cloverfields, flat, distant and ethereal as a mirage, a sheen of placid sea, lavendered by distance, flowing around dusky green islands of trees. A turn, a dip, a rise and prodigious rattle across a gaunt iron bridge, the river green as ripe olive and somnolently smooth between its black banks. More trees, and among them a white forlorn farmhouse. . . . If Somers could come to Finley, Mrs. Holcomb could, or Ray Jarvis, or Amy Le Vitre, or Mrs. Nolte. There was no law against it. Her happiness depended on the sheer chance that no one from Finley went to Coon Falls, or from Coon Falls to Finley. It was good to hold Gerald when she had worries; his substantiality quieted and innerved. Perhaps she should have said something to Somers—"You're my friend, I know. I'm happy here. And you won't talk?" Though that didn't sound right. "Please, Mr. Somers, you won't let Finley know what Coon Falls does, will you?" No—that was too stiff. How open would one have to be with a man like Somers? He had always liked her when she had been in the Bijou, and he was pleasant, big-hearted, clever.

"Well, what you thinking about?" Herb's voice rasped.

"Nothing . . . why?"

Then Weaver had stopped talking, her tardy mind informed her, and no one had been saying anything; except an inane question from Mrs. Weaver to her husband; and under cover of that, Herb: "I'll bet you're

thinking of that Somers. Pretty nice bird all right, isn't he?"

Still trying to hurt her. "I'm not—not at all. Can't I just be quiet? I'll tell you later what it is." She added a "Sh" and Herb lowered his voice to say: "Huh. What would it mean, your meeting this guy and not having a word for any of us?"

"Let's don't. Gerald's waking up, see."

Another mile brought them across a bridge to Scudder's Bluff. Silence oppressed them all as they took themselves and their baskets from the car, a silence that let Arlie perceive the Weavers knew something was wrong. Then Mrs. Weaver began with a rush: talk, action might bring them to the careless hilarity of a picnic. "Now Marshall, you and Mr. Shuman get some firewood while Mrs. Shuman and I get the other things ready. Come on, Gerald. And let's not call each other 'Mrs.' any more. It's so formal. My name's Josephine, but usually it's Joe."

There was a flurry of companionship as they began to broil their pieces of steak over the fire, but the fire was hot and the sticks too short. Their faces were numb with heat by the time the steak was done. They ate silently, and eyed the diminishing supply of iced tea in the too small pail. Arlie prepared a little speech on stinginess for later delivery to Herb. *She* had provided their share with wide margins. . . . But Herb was mad and getting madder. At least so his continuing silence said to her across the twilight as he glanced at her speculatively. Clearly, she was in his mind.

A mysterious sign from Weaver took the men farther back into the woods, whence came laughter.

"You take Gerald, he's so fussy, and I'll pick up." It was good of Josephine. Arlie wandered to the edge of the bluff with Gerald. Thirty feet below lay water,

placid and without ripple, perfect in its melancholy green. Frogs croaked from the dullness of growth beyond that merged into an oatfield, a yellow almost obscure now that the sun had left only an ineffective rose. What good, what good? Herb wouldn't believe her about Somers. She had been sorry to see him, yet glad in so far as he was one who had been kind. Just how *should* you greet a friend? Oh well . . . that was it. Marriage brought its tiffs. Her own father and mother. . . . She and Herb weren't like that, at least. No. . . .

Up through her nostrils a gray tickle of smell . . . dead fish; it made the view wrong. The smell became the view . . . what there was left of it. A slab of earth over emptiness. Stars coming. She was dizzy before the huge insubstantiality of the earth. She wanted it to become the land it was, a county, Iowa.

The others were laughing by the Ford. They must be ready to go. Gerald had been very good and quiet. She picked him up.

"I think they've been drinking a little," Josephine said as she and Gerald neared the car. "Marshall had some whiskey."

"I don't care," Arlie responded. "Maybe Herb'll feel better."

"Come on, bub!" Weaver shouted to Gerald. "You come with me and your dad in the front seat. We'll show you what life is."

"No, I think he'll want his mother."

"Hey, Weaver, you jump down to the river and get a pail of water. She's about dry. I'll get the cap off. The damn' thing sticks."

"Thanks awfully. Where's the pail?" Weaver stood for a moment black against the last light, the pail cut in definite silhouette at his side. Then he had gone, dragging with him all remaining brilliance from the sky.

"Aren't the stars pretty?" said Josephine.

"Mm-hmm."

"This is such a pretty place, too."

"Yes. . . . I wish it didn't smell so."

"Hadn't noticed it. There is a little smell."

"Suppose I were alone here with Gerald," Arlie thought, and as she looked at the woods on either side of the road, coming closer with night, she shivered and walked around the car to be nearer Herb.

"What's the matter now?" he snapped

"Nothing . . . I'm just waiting."

"Better get in. 'S where you belong."

"Do I? All right."

"Still thinking about Somersville, eh, or whatever his name is?"

"I'm not, and you know it. I just think of you."

"Rot. There, I guess that'll show us the way home."

A segment of light shot out from the car, catching the upper ironwork of the bridge below and then losing itself in the night. "Wish he'd hurry. Go on now, get in. Do as I tell you."

She did, sitting down in the back seat beside Josephine, who was pretending not to have heard. "Is the little man asleep?" she asked.

"No, but he will be before we've gone a mile. There's Mr. Weaver now. Hand me a diaper from that basket, will you?"

As they filled the radiator the men generated some joke about Weaver's long absence, and laughing explosively slopped the water over the hood. "All right now, we're off." Herb had gone a step forward into the full light of the lamps to make sure of the road. As he turned, his face seemed lengthened by the light, his lips indiscernible except as a line, his eyes intent and troubled. She wanted to reach over the seat when he got in, and hug him. His face, somehow . . . he needed her, needed what she could give. "I . . . I . . . I . . ." sang within her.

"Oh, I love him . . . love him!" and she hugged Gerald to her until his squirming made her cease.

What she was feeling would make Herb right again. She would cure him of doubt—that utterly foolish doubt. It was food to have the power to make him want her, and in that way to find their peace. As the car ground forward and fell away down the hill she began to chatter.

"Look out!" Weaver yelled, "there's a black cat!"

"What of it?"

"Bad luck. Better drive careful."

"What rot!" Herb said.

"I saw some white on it," Josephine called. "It's not all black."

"Sure thing," Herb agreed.

"No sir, that was an all-black cat," Weaver insisted.

The bridge rumbled into silence behind them, and the corn marched into and out of the light that drove the darkness. An answering light swung its spoke across the dim heavens, brightening with the wind-revealed moon, and then was a low moving visibility lost down the crossroad. Presently a drift of golden sand alongside their own car kept pace and brightened. Then the purr of a large car.

"Some one coming, Herb," Arlie called. The Ford leapt along but the big car swung powerfully past and a white hand waved derision.

"Hell! Can't race a damn' Cadillac. Wish I had dad's, I'd show him a thing or two."

"Yeh, the poor workman, you know—" Weaver began.

"Oh, shut up!"

Arlie wasn't sure she had caught the words until she saw Weaver's face turned toward Herb in questioning silhouette, as if to estimate the degree of his temper.

The next corner was taken sharply.

"There's that damn' cat again!" Weaver cried.
"Didn't I tell you!"

"Cat, nothing, that's a rabbit. You blind?" His words were propitiatory in tone, even though the meaning was not. "Look at his white tail."

"Guess you're right, but look! he's loony with the light! Can't get out of the road!"

The little jumping form was keeping to the road, criss-crossing from side to side but never finding escape, light-bound. At times it was only a visible tail, and that only a piece of white paper jerked crazily along at incredible speed. Then his head would appear as he lunged across at the opposite flying wall of light.

"Watch me get him," Herb sang out. "Rabbit stew for breakfast!"

"Oh, Mr. Shuman, not so fast!" Josephine cried. Mr. Weaver only looked at Herb but said nothing. Arlie, too, was silent. Herb's exclamation had seemed eager, alive; he would be himself now, especially if he got the rabbit, and the rabbit was losing, was only a few yards ahead of the car, almost under the light.

"Hang on!" Herb shouted as the car lurched farther ahead. But where was the rabbit in that glare on the ground below, a white glare going out and darkness falling. No, *she* was falling, into darkness profound as silence and wide as heaven. A wide shudder of darkness, and in depths above an agonizing dance. Horrible somethings at wrestle, with the commotion dying into long ripples on a lake of palpable black, beneath which she lay. A thread of white on the shore, growing brighter, a glimmering of pain.

Harshness beneath her cheek, a cutting. Stalks of weeds. The corn rustled under the sky, straight and ominous, and a light was on the road with an absurd bulk and turning wheels before it. The car? Then where was Herb?

Where was Gerald?

A white lump two yards away must be Gerald. His

size. And she had failed him. In a crisis. Had let him fly out of her arms when the car swerved and turned. She remembered that now, but she could not remember when Gerald had fallen from her. Some one was moaning beyond her as she sat upright. She fell back, she would have to crawl to Gerald. Again she crashed into the breaking dark, hideous with voices, cries, and lights. She would get to him, poor baby, distant from her appallingly . . .

Then warm bulking forms drifted across a dream of pain, coming closer. Gigantic forms, taller than the moon.

3

"You *must* tell me. I can't stand it. *How* much is he hurt? Why didn't you bring him in your car with me?"

"You can find out, lady, when we get to town. They've taken him on in, with the other fellow. He was cut up pretty bad though, I can tell you. Groggy like."

The strange car began to move along the road and past the overturned Ford, where the earth was plowed to fresh wounds of blackness. Bits of glass threw at her a broken glaze of moonlight, and one outlying last piece gave her one clear round image of the moon itself, small as a dollar and of singular brightness.

"Where's Mrs. Weaver?"

"That the other woman?"

"Yes."

"She's back in another car yet. They wanted to keep her quiet. They didn't want to tell her."

"Is Mr. Weaver hurt?"

"Yeh. Caught right under the steering wheel. Cut and mashed up bad. He was dead when we got to him I guess. If he hadn't been such a fool he wouldn't of got a lesson that won't do him no good now. Your hus-

band is just knocked unconscious. He'll come round."

"My . . . my husband? My husband was driving. . . ."

"*Your* husband! Hell! I got mixed. I'm sorry, lady."

The car increased its speed. Arlie stared unseeingly at Gerald, whom she had to hold with one arm. He had been crying when they gave him to her and was still whimpering. They were skimming down the streets of Finley before she saw, by a passing light, the enormous bruise upon his forehead.

CHAPTER XVI

BACKGROUND

I

PLAINLY there was nothing to do after the funeral. A fatigue of pity had mechanized the movements of all. Peter Shuman was wearing an invisible path up and down the living-room, extending his route, on eccentric turns, into the rich darkness of his office-den beyond. Mrs. Shuman rocked nervously, saying nothing, and on the other side of the table Gloria held a magazine and wanted to read. She compromised at turning the pages.

"I think that would be a good editorial, mother, on the European situation. Looks like war to me. Don't you want to look it over?" Gloria held out the magazine until her mother shook her head, reproachfully: life must of course go on, but not at once.

"It might help you to get your mind off things."

"No . . . Gloria."

"I know how you feel. We all do. But there's nothing to be done." She turned her head toward a stir she had half seen, half felt, in the doorway. "Here's Arlie. . . . Is Gerald asleep?"

Arlie nodded but still hesitated where her blue dress blurred into the shadows. Her face and the white sling in which she carried a broken arm were alone vivid. Mr. Shuman emerged from his office and swung a chair around. "You'll find this one comfortable," he said in a low tone, a hushed projection of an earlier hour.

Without reply she sat down, and Mrs. Shuman went to the window, where through parted curtains she looked out at the night-filled land. Mr. Shuman sat down by Arlie, and she turned to him suddenly: it had been as if she had caught a voiceless preliminary of speech. He returned her glance helplessly, caught wanting in some responsibility he acknowledged.

Gloria struck across their feebly magnetic field: "You look feverish, Arlie. Your color's so high. Are you?"

"I don't think so." Her voice sounded dryly remote. With her free hand she drew the hair from her forehead, letting the light fall on its paler height, and showing the true length of her face.

"Heavens, don't do that, it makes you look so old," Gloria laughed, and checked herself.

Mrs. Shuman returned to her chair. "I think we'd better go to bed early tonight, all of us," she said. "There's no object in staying up."

"I'm ready any time," said Arlie. "I just came down because you were all here."

"Yes, yes . . . surely," Mr. Shuman put in.

"If you'll help me with my clothes again, Gloria."

"Of course."

"I suppose it's settled, then,"—Mrs. Shuman seemed to be concluding a long debate—"that none of us will wear mourning."

"If you think best, mother," Gloria murmured.

"I know that Herbert wouldn't want us to. He always laughed at it."

When had he said that? Arlie could not remember. It must have been before she knew him.

"Our sorrow," Mrs. Shuman went on, "needn't be worn on our sleeve. It will be inside, and worn there always. At least for me." Her lips thinned until Herb seemed to be modelling himself out of her face. Arlie watched, transfixed.

"Yes, mother," Gloria was saying.

Mr. Shuman was pacing the room again, fingering his heavy watch chain, from which, as he passed the lamp, the light gleamed in minute brilliance. Then Arlie bent her head to stare with the other women, stupidly, at the angular gold patterns in the dark rug.

A long hot hour ticked itself away on dull ratchets of talk before they went to bed.

2

As she settled herself for the hot night under a single sheet Arlie reflected that tomorrow would be easier. It was all done now, all the hard first part. The arrival of Herb's parents at five o'clock the morning after the accident had meant everything. They had taken complete charge. Mrs. Shuman had given directions to the women about packing the linen and clothes and had then brought Arlie and Gerald on to Lawson; Mr. Shuman had staid to accompany the body on Monday, and he was to see about having the furniture crated, about the lease on the house—all those things.

Gerald was better, and the doctor had said he would come through without a scar. Her arm would be healed in six weeks.

Nothing remained—but living. Living without Herb.

He was alone now, in the cemetery, a bleak one where the grass was already scorched, and the withered stems of Decoration Day flowers lay brown on different graves. Next year she would be putting some on Herb's. She would be tall and straight. Maybe she would wear mourning anyway . . . carry a handkerchief, yet not cry. A silent grief, to be borne preciously through all her life. Gerald would grow up to be like Herb; he would question her about his father, even when she was old. Some day she would tell him everything. Even then,

when she would be sixty, maybe, Herb would still be young and straight and slim . . . and level under the earth, his head by the roots of the evergreen. Young always, that was something. . . . Later, when she died too—suddenly heaven was remote and dim as a story read aloud when one hasn't listened. A blank wave of time—and time forgotten. Heaven unreal. Had it ever been real? Even when she had been converted? . . . Time slipping, leaving no mark. Gerald breathes. Asleep now.

Herb had taken only one swallow of whiskey, Mr. Weaver had said. Mr. Shuman himself had seen the flask, almost full. People had spread the story he had been drinking heavily. Mrs. Wentling, Gracia's mother, had let her know about that. But it hadn't been the whiskey . . . Somers. . . . She wouldn't have to tell anybody. Couldn't tell anybody.

What was it Mr. Shuman had said about talking to the coroner and that everything was all right? And Mrs. Weaver, crying so. If anybody cried the wife should, and she hadn't. Wouldn't. Not yet. Mr. Weaver with his bumps and sprained ankle. . . . If the Weavers hadn't proposed that trip, or if she had remembered the butter, if the cat hadn't crossed the road. The rabbit might have bolted out of sight, might have . . . or Somers might have come a day later. If only she hadn't known Somers at all, or ever worked at the Bijou, or known Herb . . . especially if she hadn't had Gerald . . . if she'd just staid mad at Ned Rickenberg that time when he and Jake had gone to the train with those girls. . . . But it was all together. Nothing could be undone now.

She twisted her head to look out at the cornfields, dim under the moonlight. Frogs croaked somewhere. They kept at it and at it and at it, like some one winding a big cheap watch.

Where was that rabbit now?

"O Herb!" That fresh earth was piled in such a weight. She and Gerald in the room alone. "Herb, Herb, come back, oh, come back, we're going to need you so!"

Only the light swish of curtains, walls, chairs; and the room as if some one had whispered a few minutes ago.

3

"If you'll just come in with me, Arlie," Mr. Shuman said a few mornings later when they had all drifted into the living-room after breakfast. He threw back the door of his office and waited for her to pass in. "There are some things we need to go over together, and we might as well do it now."

Despite her many weeks in the house Arlie had never more than glanced into this room before. By the great oak desk stood a tall letter file; a typewriter sat on a swinging arm. Taking the large leather easy-chair by the window she snapped the reading-light by its side on and off as she waited for him to begin.

He tapped the green blotter with a paper knife. "Yes, there are several things we must fix up, so that you'll know where you are."

"I want to," she replied.

"First there's the bank stock. Two thousand at par. Probably worth three. It'll average ten per cent anyway. Last year it paid sixteen. That'll make you an income of two to three hundred a year. . . . And the Ford's yours, of course. If you want to sell it I'll buy it at this year's price. I need another one, really, for the hired men."

"All right."

"That money, plus the three hundred, about, that Herbert had in the bank—and you had some money in your

own account—but with all of it invested, even at eight per cent, you can't live on that."

"No sir."

"So there'll have to be some other provision for the present. I've thought of an allowance, such as I give Gloria. I'd thought we might start that at about one hundred a month, or maybe more. That would give you an income of around fourteen or fifteen hundred dollars."

"That's awfully good of you."

"Not at all . . . not at all. It's just getting the right thing settled."

"But it *is* good of you. I don't know what call I have to expect anything. If my brother died I don't think *my* family would expect to give his wife an allowance. She'd go back to her own people, or get a job, or something. Of course, they couldn't give her an allowance."

"I know . . . I know . . . but this is different. I'd planned to work Herb in on some deals that would have given him as much of an income as this anyway; and to buy more stock for him when Burr left. I just didn't do it soon enough. There didn't seem to be any hurry and I was waiting a little. You see, all that Mrs. Shuman and I have would eventually have gone to Herbert and Gloria anyway, and now Gerald will come in for Herbert's share at our death, so that *his* future is settled."

His face was hot. All this was an effort he didn't want to make. His eyes drooped a little, his voice drooped. Heat from the fields drove in at the open window.

"Of course," he was adding, "Mrs. Shuman and I expect to educate Gerald . . . send him to Ames, Iowa City, Harvard, anywhere he wants to go. You won't have to worry about that. . . . The allowance will start

now. . . . Of course there's this about it. . . . In case, you know, that you should, should ever marry again, the allowance to you would stop, I suppose."

"Oh yes, Mr. Shuman, but I won't. I couldn't, you see. Not after Herb."

"Well, I don't expect you will, my girl, but years change one. You can never tell. It will be your own life you'll lead, not ours. We . . . we want you here . . . long as you'll stay. And Gerald. It will be quiet here, but life will be comfortable. Things'll jog along, somehow." He rose.

Arlie wanted to say something more but could not. On the porch, she could see that Mrs. Shuman was waiting for her with a bit of sewing in her lap.

4

Arlie settled herself in a wicker rocker, trying to take in what the new situation would mean. It was too much: a freedom that she hadn't wanted; more money, probably, than her father was making; and Gerald provided for.

"I suppose," Mrs. Shuman began, "that your father-in-law made clear, too, what we intend to do for Gerald?"

It was as if she had been listening.

"Besides his education I'm going to take over the problem of his clothes. I'll clothe him always."

"You don't need to do that. I'll have money enough."

"No, that money is for you alone. You shouldn't have to depend on it for Gerald. *He'll* come into far more of an income than that, some day. No . . . you're not going to suffer financially because of Herbert's going. And if you do ever marry again, why, we'd be—"

"But I'm not going to marry again."

"No, so you think now, and of course it would be nicer if you didn't, for Gerald I mean. You see how . . .

Yet it's your own life you'll be leading, and we can't expect . . . we can't expect you to be bound to us always if you're able to find happiness elsewhere. . . . You understand, Arlie, I don't say you will, but if you do, and it would be easier for you without Gerald, why we could get the papers made out in half an hour and adopt him."

"Adopt him? . . . Your own grandson?"

"Oh yes, that's often done. We love Gerald, you see, as if he were ours. He is, in a sense. And with Gloria gone he'd be such a comfort to us. Some one to love, and to have love us."

"But I'd never give Gerald up, Mrs. Shuman. Why, he's mine, my baby. Not if I did marry I wouldn't give him up. But I'm not *going* to marry again. How could I?"

"I don't say you will. It's just in case you ever do I want you to know how it would be with us, and about Gerald." She was winking back the tears. Blindly she gathered her sewing into a bundle, preparatory to rising. A lump came in Arlie's own throat; she put out a hand. Mrs. Shuman patted it perfunctorily as she went.

It had been no human touch. Their bloods had not pulsed together. There was so much to think about, now that she was left alone. Only slowly did the idea develop that something had been askew.

5

Quite evidently they had talked things over. Mrs. Shuman had known everything her husband was to say, and what he would forget—Gerald's clothes. What plan was behind their talk? What had they to gain or to lose when they had already lost Herbert? They had gained Gerald, for a while. . . .

She gave it up and walked through the grove to the hired men's house to talk with Mrs. Gardewine, who with

her husband now had charge there; Marie, a Bohemian girl, having taken her place in the "big" house. Arlie liked to talk with Mrs. Gardewine. There might be things in her mind she didn't speak, but there were few things about yourself, you felt, that she didn't say. The more you read, the more "cultured" you were, the more you thought about people in the back of your mind, even while you talked with them. Mrs. Gardewine was a relief.

6

While her arm was mending Arlie returned to her reading, wondering as she did so that her mother-in-law seemed not even to notice a result she had earlier worked so hard to achieve. She found Hardy, beginning with *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and taking in turn *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. She told herself that she liked best *Far from the Madding Crowd*, but it was Henchard on the road with his canary in the cage that in her dreams was real. In one poisonous dream she stumbled down the road after him calling to his heedless ears, but could no more make him hear than she could insert herself into the invulnerable solidity of the book.

Then the outbreak of war in Europe absorbed her hours, and throughout August she followed the German progress through Liége, Namur. Gloria at first inclined to be pro-German, but weakened under her mother's tears for Belgium. Mr. Shuman, at first conscious of his German father, only read the papers, said little, and tried to hide his opinions behind the President's proclamation of neutrality.

Arlie saw the war only as interesting news. When she argued at all she upheld the Allies, and then picked up the paper to find her satisfaction fed with another Teu-

tonic advance. Simply, she was loyal to power, and the destructive brilliance of its drive across life generated a harsh glow that reached cleansingly to the fundamental in her. The more dreadful the news the more peaceful her day. At night she would again announce herself pro-Ally, and wake to read avidly of a defeat. It was not to be so later.

One morning when Mrs. Shuman abruptly turned the talk from books and war Arlie felt rebuffed. Very well, she would not read, and all afternoon she did not turn a page. But she felt deprived and worried, and that night she read until two o'clock, when Constance and Sophia Baines were locked in their graves. Then *The Scarlet Letter* drew her across its opening pages again—she had begun it in high school—and on until she came to the woodland scene where a light graciously lacking good and evil shone about Hester and Arthur in a world of their own creation, all persons forgot. Golden serenity of sunlight, and the musk of a living world. . . . Through the succeeding pages her mood broke and ran discordantly into the wild and black distortions, lit by reflection of deep fires . . . a persistent disharmony that kept its ominous notes thrumming. . . . She plucked *The Grandissimes* from the shadiest corner of the bookshelves.

7

More and more the care of Gerald had been taken from her. Gloria bathed him, dressed him, undressed him, and Mrs. Shuman was already planning his fall and winter wardrobe. Arlie looked on. No questions were referred to her, mother and daughter decided everything. Perhaps that was their right, Arlie reflected, since Mrs. Shuman was paying the bills. Nevertheless . . .

Gerald's bruise had almost healed by that time. He would go just as often to Gloria or his grandmother as

to Arlie. That might be different when her arm allowed her to take him again and to cuddle him safely. For the present she tried to accept his new distance, and tried once to think of him as another's child. It would have been easier so. Yet he persisted in being hers so much that every defection hurt.

"He must have every advantage," Mrs. Shuman reiterated one afternoon.

"I know. I'm reading lots now. I hope I can know a good deal by the time he's old enough to make it count."

"Mm-hmm, yes, you should. But background, you know, background . . ." She was fond of the word.

"Won't that be background?"

"Oh yes . . . but we must all help. Herbert would have meant so much to the poor little man. We must do everything in our power."

Arlie left the room blindly, knowing for the first time that she actively disliked the Shumans. "I'll never, never give them Gerald," she told herself.

8

Toward the first of September Gloria's fiancé came for a week-end. At dinner Arlie watched him carefully, noting his high bald forehead with its peninsula of hair showing the striations of the brush. His blue eyes held at times a meekness that for a moment projected affability and then timidly shifted, as if for all his big body's assurance he was not quite sure of any one about him. Then gathering himself he dominated all. They talked at first in a distant echo of the day of the funeral, as if Mr. Whittaker's visit precipitated anew the dispersing mists. But midway through the meal Gloria began on dances, outwitted chaperones, canoe trips up the river. Mr. Shuman smiled his inability to handle such topics, and his

wife ate silently and disapprovingly, as if to intimate that such talk, though well enough on another day, was at present out of place.

Shortly Arlie felt the duty of conversation. To point that duty Mr. Whittaker turned to her with a smile and a question about Gerald.

"Oh yes, much better. He's been all right for some time. He . . ." She could say no more, though the silence hung before her as a golden space. She could not use it, found no word to drop into it. Only a throaty murmur. All was gray.

"Yes, you must see Gerald, Arch. I've been giving him his bath regularly up till this morning."

She might say something about her arm's preventing her; say a word of praise for Gloria. Her face was frozen, her tongue uncertain.

Later she and Mr. Whittaker were alone by the library table for a few minutes. "Who's been reading Jack London?" he asked, taking *Martin Eden* from the table.

"I have," she said. "It's a peculiar book, isn't it? All that awful work. I don't believe a man could do it, do you?"

"The laundry work would have been excellent training if his wife washed at home."

"Does he marry? I haven't finished it yet."

"I don't recall. It's a case of almost, I believe. Drowns himself instead, or something like that. But I shouldn't spoil it for you. I'm afraid I have."

"I don't care so much about the end any more," she answered.

They were still discussing plots when Mrs. Shuman rustled in and Gloria returned from upstairs, where she had put Gerald to bed, a task she had let her mother perform for the last week.

Immediately the silence widened. Mrs. Shuman would think they had had nothing to say, when all the time . . .

After a little she and her mother-in-law went upstairs. "I'm afraid you're tired tonight, Arlie. You haven't had much to say."

"Do I ever?"

"But we must try to make this visit pleasant for Archer. Just a few words now and then, anyway, so that you'll count, you know."

"But, I *did* talk to him. While you were all gone I did. About books."

"Oh, did you? I'm so glad. Gloria will be pleased." She bent over to give a good-night kiss. The look that accompanied it commingled admonition and a distant approval, but within the look Arlie saw a sharpness that made her open her own door quickly. Just what it meant she could not have said.

9

"I wish you had been able to keep up your conversation about books with Archer," Mrs. Shuman said as they sat on the porch the morning after Mr. Whittaker's departure.

Arlie temporized by throwing a doll to Gerald, who, after a fall, was considering tears. "See the nice dolly, Gerald. He wants to play with you."

"I'm afraid," Mrs. Shuman persisted, "that he'll think you don't like him, or won't recognize your . . . abilities. He told Gloria he found it hard to talk with you."

"Oh, did he?" But it was true. When he had later tried various topics she had sat dumb. Now she wanted to accuse him of disloyalty to the little community of interest that had begun to form that first evening. "Oh, did he?" Her words trembled to so faint an echo she was not sure she had said them, but Mrs. Shuman was answering the question with a nod and a "Yes."

"It's just that we want every one in the family to be

friendly, and Archer soon will be in the family. By a year from now, anyway."

"They'll make a splendid couple, won't they?" said Arlie.

"Yes . . . they will. I'm glad you see it. His family is very choice. Judge Whittaker, you know. Archer went into his father's law office in June. There's not a better family in Iowa. It makes me very glad at times. I've always believed in developing the best we have by such marriages. We'll have something in time. . . . There are lots of good things about England. The war brings them out. And here in Iowa—"

"We'll have first hogs and then people, you mean?"

Mrs. Shuman's face contracted. "No," she said, "I do *not* mean 'first hogs and then people.' But what do *you* mean?"

"Nothing, I suppose."

"I meant," Mrs. Shuman said, "that if the best families in Iowa intermarry that we'll build up, well, yes, something like they have in England. Only of course this is a democracy. We'll have a democratic aristocracy. But we must not permit any marriages that—Gerald! what are you doing?"

Gerald looked up innocently from the corner where he had set a potted fern on the floor and was carefully plucking the fronds.

"Oh, how bad you are!" Arlie sprang for him. "You've spoiled the fern. I feel like slapping you!"

"No. The fern doesn't matter. Don't punish him."

When the mess had been cleaned up Arlie waited for her mother-in-law to continue. She had to remind her at last: "You were talking about Iowa families."

"Oh yes, but I'd said all I intended, I guess. I must see how Marie is getting along."

Arlie completed the thought: "We must prevent such marriages as that of Herbert with you. Gloria's helps to

balance things." She wondered if Gloria or any one had ever told Whittaker about Gerald. Perhaps she could find out, but she doubted that Gloria could be open enough to discuss such things. And why had Gerald attacked the fern at the one moment when his grandmother was about to say more than she intended?

Mrs. Shuman returned to her chair. "For instance, Arlie—" Arlie breathed more quickly; perhaps she was to find out after all. "For instance, if you should ever marry again I'd want you to marry into as good a family as possible. You're pretty, you're bright, and while your family isn't exactly what I'd call well-to-do, still they're above the average—"

"No, I don't think they are."

"Oh yes, they are too. Your father must have had great possibilities once."

Had Herb told his mother of her romancings about her father, and had she believed them? Or did she believe them only when belief might extricate her from an unintended situation? "Your father was sick, wasn't he, when he was younger, and didn't that hold him back?"

"I guess so," Arlie answered weakly.

"Well, as I was saying, if you ever *should* marry again you ought to marry as well as you can. But on the other hand—that isn't our car, is it? I thought it was for a minute. On the other hand, I don't think you ought to let the other person's lack of family stand in the way of your happiness. We have to be reasonable in this world."

"Do you think I should marry again? Do you want me to?"

"*Want* you to! Why, Arlie, how could I? What makes you think of such a thing?"

"Your talking about it, I suppose."

"Nothing of the kind. Can't you see, my dear—" Mrs. Shuman hitched her chair closer. "Don't you see

that I'm trying to tell you what I think best just in case anything of the kind should ever come up—in five, ten years—so that you'll be prepared, have some standards of judgment, something that an older person sees and knows? That's been the trouble, in part, that you haven't had such standards. . . . I don't want to hurt you, dear. It's just that I want to guide you, and do what I can for you, what's best, for Herbert's sake if not for your own. You're going to live a long time yet, I hope, and you won't always have some one watching you. Herbert's going makes me see how accidental our lives are. I've been sick for a long time now. Five years, one year, and I may be gone too. But I'd want the consciousness that I'd done what I could for you. Don't you see? . . . Please answer me. . . . Don't you *see*, Arlie! Don't look at me that way. . . ."

Arlie was standing now.

"Don't look at me that way. Sit down. I want to talk to you, I want you to see this as it is. Why, if I should lose Gloria, and her marriage will be almost like losing her, you and Gerald will be all I have. But if I should go too I'd want you to have something to guide you. . . . Look at me, Arlie. Don't stare off that way, I can't stand it. Where are you going? Sit down, I tell you; *sit down!*"

She followed Arlie into the living-room.

"I *will* put my arm around you. I won't have you thinking what you are. This is my house and you're not to go upstairs unless I say you can. . . . Arlie, Arlie!" she shrieked, and then fell weeping on a bench at the foot of the staircase. A door above clicked shut. Her sobbing rose from a suppressed moan to hysterically keen indrawals of breath, and a wildness of utterly free and animalian hurt.

Gerald, who had followed them from the porch, stood in the middle of the wide doorway regarding her.

Slowly his lower lip projected, curling over his upper one. He opened his mouth and his cheeks became taut. Mrs. Shuman, controlling herself suddenly, swept down to him. "Oh, my baby, my little baby," she cried, "my little Herbert!"

IO

In her own room Arlie found no tears. She was too still for that, as if what she had perceived had blinded the centres of instinct, holding her tranced.

She had been a damn' fool not to see before. They had never wanted her and they hadn't wanted her family. They hated her. They thought she had thwarted Herb, held him back, and because they could see no clear way out except the way he had impulsively taken, they had blamed her. Now that he was dead they wanted their own blood, but they wanted also to be rid of her—in any easy way, and marriage would be the easiest. Besides, if she married she might give up Gerald. They'd adopt him all right, oh yes! And all that talk about their not wanting her to marry . . . that was why they didn't care whether she read or not. It didn't matter, now, for she wasn't to be long in the family anyway, and Gerald's background—that, they would look after themselves when she was out of their "place in life"—or below it.

They had planned it all out and begun their campaign at once, hinting and hinting until they got too close—spilled over. Now, not all the words Mrs. Shuman could say would ever cover what she had uncovered.

II

At luncheon Arlie was taciturn. Indeed, no one had many words except Gloria, and she chattered half through the meal until she noticed Arlie's controlled mouth and

her more than usual tenderness toward Gerald. "What's the matter with this bunch, anyway?" she demanded. "Do you all have the glooms because little Gloria is going to be married and wants to gas about it a little?"

"That's hardly the way to correct us, in any case, is it?" her mother inquired. Mr. Shuman ate stolidly on.

Arlie spent the afternoon in her room. Dinner was worse than lunch, for by that time, she judged, everybody had been told. She went directly to bed, taking a book with her, but turning out the light at nine. She tossed about until she heard a clock strike two. If only she hadn't weaned Gerald so long ago. It would be a comfort to nurse him, to have some one really dependent on her. That would make her love him more, doing things for him. . . .

Doing things for him would make *them* love him more too. That she had noticed when her broken arm had compelled them to help. But Gloria would be going away soon . . . going away. If only she were going. . . . Why not? She had the money. They didn't want her. If Mrs. Shuman had to care for Gerald a long time, and came to love him even more than she did now . . . then she could come back for him, and take Gerald utterly and forever away. Then she would be off their hands, and so would Gerald. They would suffer intolerably. At least Mrs. Shuman would.

12

Delicious—to wake to early morning on a farm. The air grows dimly and then clamorously brilliant with sound, as the sky does with color. Cacklings of the earth, and good rich sounds, people astir in the distance, and coolness, sweet and translucent, flowing everywhere. The dawn comes through the trees like lantern light.

Good, then, lying in bed, to search through the night-covered hours, rummaging with a cool and silver hand to find what, though mislaid, is surely there: a neat, a perfect, and a workable stratagem for meeting the business of the day.

CHAPTER XVII

DURATION

I

AT breakfast she announced a visit to Coon Falls. She would leave Gerald, if he wouldn't be too much trouble, and though she would be gone but a short time she would take her trunk; she wanted to go over her clothes with her mother. There were mild but ineffectual protests and the next morning she took the train.

During the wait of twenty minutes at Shelley Junction, she rechecked her trunk to Des Moines. Coon Falls had been only an excuse; she certainly did not want to go home. On the moving train again, she watched the track to Coon Falls with no regret, and covered the pictures it called up with brighter memories of a trip to Des Moines in state fair week when she had been fourteen: there had been the pressure of people, lights, and streets of glass and stone. She would not know one person there, but she was wearied with the people she did know and wanted time to think, undisturbed by the opinions of others.

It was to be a walk down another street in life, with the protection of a few hundred dollars in the bank and more coming every month. When she had found her way about she would return for Gerald, and bring him up in Des Moines. Herb she would remember—but apart from all his family.

The train whistled around a curve, nearer and nearer to freedom. Freedom it was, after all. The burning weight of her pregnancy had been lifted, and then the weight of marriage—for weight it must have been if she felt so light now, with her thoughts singing along the gleaming stave of dipping and rising wires.

But as the hours passed she grew tired and cramped. Her dreams of the city disintegrated. She began to see how vague the details were, and how they gave on vacancy as she tried to think them. Just how would she live? Just how, when she had Gerald again, would she bring him up? Tensing herself she tried to see even a few minutes of those years, and could not find a moment. Emptiness opened before her . . . an illimitable and meaningless width after years that had been too broken, and too full.

She shrank. Suddenly, as the train hurled her nearer, she did not want Des Moines. She would take the first train back—and on that thought she dozed.

She woke to see the waves of the evening prairie becoming blue where trees filled the land beyond the corn, and a whisper of smoke lay across the dulled southern sky. That would be Des Moines. She was reattached to her plan, she would carry it through.

Houses thickened and raced by; a brick-yard with a violence of orange and white light in the vents of the kilns; omnipresent smoke; dirty streets. There was a general rising as the car darkened with the in-pressing of buildings on each side . . . then a street choked with automobiles . . . a long station . . . Des Moines.

2

After dinner in the station restaurant Arlie boarded a street car, crossed the river, and found a hotel. The room and bath assigned her she examined wonderingly.

She decided to bathe, and for a half hour laved herself in a luxury of water, toying with its flawed and brilliant surfaces. Dressed, she sat by the window, watching the automobiles bossed with heads, the unindividual persons, black and foreshortened, walking with absurd steps down the street. Back they came again in the low length of light, above which, now that day had gone, she was high and isolate. These people were not just walking, just riding, but were all going somewhere. Was this something she might enter? She must enter. A lifting summons pulsed to her through the dwindling light, an invitation to join absurdly in a slow, significant dance. Somebody was calling from the street, somebody behind a corner, smiling. She would go down.

She went, restraining herself to a hurried walk as she approached the lobby, as if she were late and not going to get . . . somewhere . . . on time. As she crossed the lobby she laughed, and when some men in the leather chairs turned to look she laughed again and pushed aside the remaining door. . . . It was a darker street than it had seemed from above, but around the corner hung lights. She laughed again, almost a cackle, and put her hand against dark stone to steady herself. A woman turned to look, and then spoke to a companion. . . . People were so funny. . . . A middle-aged man with heavy paunch and mustache smiled as if he understood.

A mouth made prim forced down the before uncontrollable gusts; yet every few paces an unreasoning, undeniable upshoot of hilarity assailed her. Why couldn't these people—oh, these fools!—understand? You just feel that way. Even the white cluster-lights were bland and glazed and foolish—dead bubbly souls of ancient, inexplicable laughters. Shop windows, luminous with winey colors, strips of sky, and a creamy foolishness of gauze, with wax women in the latest fashions, their

cheeks feverishly red, staring at the waxen people in the cars, at the black and gay people on the sidewalks, or gazing eternally at the dark stories of near buildings that stood hugely stupid under the moon. . . . Everywhere somebody waited, with nothing to do but wait until she should come, to look at that same moon held in blue sky by cold laughter. Abruptly down a street shone a moving picture theatre whose sign sprayed lights at the sky: green lights, crimson, yellow fire . . . and under the marquée a white shout of light. Behind her was darkness, and back to it she turned, because it was only dusky after all; and dusk might hold somebody to laugh with her—at the blocks of emptiness and stone that would be full and vacant again, and again. It was enough to make anybody laugh.

Her throat felt sore, her side ached.

She was empty herself, and tired, and wanted to sit down. Like a light laughter had gone out in her. She had never felt more serious. . . . This was Des Moines.

3

Through a mist of weariness she noted a brighter store front, a candy shop, and the pull of a white inner blaze drew her blinking inside, where the streaky gleam of nickel and the hardness of white glaze on marble-topped tables wove dazzlingly an intricacy of laced metallic light.

Her chair was uncomfortable but she was glad to sit down and watch dully the two young men at a table. They were watching her. . . . She twitched in the satisfaction of being looked at. Her chocolate ice cream soda should come. It came: brown, frothy, and clearly reflected in the yellow shimmer that floated beneath the impenetrable cold polish of the table, a floating of light that formulated a new distance, a brief glimpse into an uncanny and infinite depth, strangely superimposed above

the floor and her outstretched feet . . . an unfathomable depth held in the hard circle and salver of a table top.

One of the men coughed behind his hand, a preliminary cough. She brought her feet back to her chair. Another cough, and then whispering and laughter, as over some secret. A few bubbles of delayed hilarity rose in her. She forced them, wanting to laugh, to share laughter, but could only smile, a perfectly controlled smile as if she too were remembering some secret, one that might even render these men a little inferior. . . .

Another cough. She half turned toward the summons, then back. "I say," one of them ventured in a tone that lapsed as the other's whisper slipped to her ears: "Stop it, you simp, can't you see her rings?"

Her left hand, that had grasped the nickel container, relaxed with palm upward, only the gold bands of rings gleaming at her but concealed from all others. She stared at the bands. What had she done?

The men were laughing at her openly. She sucked for the last time at the fluid in her glass and it roared into the straw. Another explosion of laughter. . . . She walked to the cash register carefully, so that she would not betray the quickening dizziness in her, and out into the street. She was feverish.

Back in her room at the hotel her mind flew in relentless circles: she had tried to conceal her rings, she had tried to open the way to a flirtation, to walking with one of the men, with both—when Herb was cold and dark and quiet in his grave, dreaming an unceasing dream, of her and of her loyalty and of their boy—who wasn't with her longer. She had laughed, like an idiot and at nothing; had laughed beside the buildings, pompous under the moon; had been interested in what two men might think of her. She had concealed her rings from them when Herb lay northward, dreaming an unceasing dream. She . . .

In the morning, after listing the possibilites in the "want ad" columns, she inquired her way about the city, at last secured a pleasant front room in a house part way up a long hill on the West Side; there were no other roomers. She paid her bill at the hotel and ordered her trunk sent out.

It arrived in the afternoon, just as she finished the second of two letters: a short one to her parents, informing them that she was in Des Moines, and another to Mrs. Shuman. The latter had been hard to write. As she sealed it she did not care whether or not they believed her story that she had met in Coon Falls an old schoolmate, Belle Ritchie, who was coming to Des Moines that evening, and that she had hastily decided to go with her to do some shopping. She was staying with an aunt of Belle's, and would remain a week or so. More later. Love to all and kiss Gerald for me. . . .

They had never believed her tales, and they probably wouldn't begin now, yet they had to be told something. Just what didn't matter.

The twisting ride down town, past dingy houses and into the cleaner business district with its clamorous crescendo, renewed in her a little the excitement she had felt on the previous evening. At Sixth and Walnut she took the sidewalk, seeking the river. Finding it she found also the library, and did not wander back for dinner until seven-thirty. She had never seen so many magazines.

At last she returned to her room with an evening paper and sat in a rocking-chair by the window, choosing a wardrobe from the advertisements. Dyeing the illustrations in colors remembered from the shop windows she draped herself in them, finding the result charming.

It was also something to busy herself with. She rocked gently, watching the immediate front of houses, a hard front with the city solid beyond them: beyond were shop windows and the alluring glass and stone of the chattering streets down which she could walk, trim and beautiful, and by her side somebody walking step and step, somebody proud of her, telling her how beautiful she was. His head close to hers, with the clipped hair like a shadow by his ear, and the drop of the jaw. "We'll go back now, Arlie," he was saying, and her name within his voice was a caressed sound. "Back to the hotel." There she threw her coat off and was softly gathered to him. She relaxed. Each desired and was desirable. She relaxed to him completely, slim and willowy and faint beside his strength. "Herb," she murmured, and his reply was the low tone as when he had bent over the car's side to say good-bye . . . at the first, long ago. . . . Oblivious she rocked, rocked. . . . He moved, prone beside her, and she threw her arms around him, holding him close. . . .

The rocker squeaked. She stopped. He was cold and straight and silent, and in her dream nakedly complete and dead. She had been giving herself to a dead man, to a dissolution. She writhed from the rocker and threw herself toward the bed, sinking on her knees beside it. "Herb, Herb!" she cried aloud. "It can't be, it can't! You're not dead, oh, you can't be dead, I love you so." Unuttered cries continued in the malign darkness of her brain, suddenly vast. "I'm yours, Herb, and I love just you, just you, not any one else. Answer me. . . ." There was a collapse of the sudden vastness of her brain to a shoulder of self. Sobs were in her throat. She was pithless, darkened, a blind stupor. Nothing was seen, nothing felt. A blind-spot.

Then gray distance, an outer murmur. Her knees were cricks of pain. She heaved herself on the bed.

Soft steps withdrew from the door, tip-toeing down the stairs. Somebody had been listening? Somebody who had heard her cry out. With the light turned on the room was familiar again and hers. Her foot was asleep. She sat down again to her paper. She could spend a hundred, maybe two hundred, on her clothes. . . . There is a friendliness about a newspaper that has not been completely read.

6

The next day she spent in the stores. At first she was bewildered, but becoming more expert as the day went on she grew less open to the saleswomen's suggestions. When she returned at last to her room she found piled outside her door numerous boxes. The landlady was frankly inquisitive, but Arlie said little, and put the boxes in her closet unopened. There was no reason to take them out, no one to show them to except the landlady, no one to wear them for except everybody. What did it matter?

She tried to read, let the paper fall to her lap, and for an hour rocked, rocked.

Twice in the next week she started for the library, but was deflected by distaste for all books and magazines. In the newspapers she found happenings. She bought all there were, and read with careful interest the varying stories of the same events: chiefly war.

In the fall evenings now she walked. The long incline of Grand Avenue drew her past houses and lawns such as she had never seen. The Shuman house, she felt, would be inconspicuous here. Then the houses disturbed her, as if they expected something of her she could not do. Thereafter she walked in the grayer, meaner parts of town, and felt comfortably at home.

A week after she had hidden the new clothes in the closet she opened a box and put on a suit. It was

familiar, like a very old suit, though she had seen it only once before. Having it in the closet for so long a time had made it hers. That night she rose about two, and ripping her old nightgown down the middle put on a lacy blue one from another box. She lay very straight in bed so that she would not rumple it. At last she slept.

As she read the papers, rocking by the window, she would try to look into the days ahead. The last week had been part of what she had looked forward to three weeks ago. Was the rest to be like it? No, some day she would return for Gerald. But after that would she continue in Des Moines, growing old there, with no husband and few friends? Would Gerald grow up remembering her as a thin and lonely woman? . . . What was Des Moines, after all, blaring with noise, holding thousands of lives, and the place and slow time of her own life?

Realizing one morning that nothing demanded her getting out of bed at any certain hour, she dozed until noon. As if to approve her inactivity she found later an impersonal note from Mr. Shuman enclosing a draft for one hundred dollars. The money would come like that always, she reflected . . . the only interruption, the only event. She looked again into that bland, featureless time, an unhurrying pallor between her and a remote cessation of that pallor.

Much of the days thereafter she spent in bed, closing her eyes to the refining lines of the November trees. They, and the dulling sky, meant more time gone—and to that thought she would have closed her mind. Once she had lain down at night to dreams and to a world bright or menacing with what was going to happen. Now she was looking for nothing, for nobody. No discovery was to be dreaded, there was no secret to be made disgracefully known. She had no work to do, not even for her son, who was looking to another for help, and

would so continue until she came to the point, somehow not yet reached, of carrying out the one plan in her life: tearing Gerald from her mother-in-law.

But when she thought long on even this she ceased to care. Only in those moments when it seemed that everything had gone did she clutch back at life with a start, with a weird sense of something infinitely valuable that had been lost, but what she could not tell until she found it.

Then quickly it would drop into place and she would latch the door on it: yes, she would return for Gerald, sometime. . . .

7

When she was sitting by her window one evening about seven, she discovered that her rings, with which she had been idle toying, had slipped quite off her fingers into her astonished palm. She gasped and looked at them stupidly.

She did not replace them; instead she dropped them in a back corner of a drawer and began to dress quickly; she was late to dinner. Her best silk stockings, the loveliest waist, the better suit . . . she did not know why they went on.

After a well-chosen dinner she sought a moving picture show, sought it as if it were part of a plan. The first reels flickered pleasantly on; the last reels she endured, impatient for the first scene to come again. At last it came, and after making perfectly sure of the overlapping, she made her way out and turned the corner with unquestioning steps. But even then she did not know where she was going, nor did she know until she sat down on the nickel-backed chair, placed her gloves on the white table, ordered a chocolate ice cream soda, and looked about the candy store she had found on her first night in Des Moines.

As she looked the buoyancy of the last hours sank. Not even here had life lifted its face, nor time become less implacably bland and continuing; the only people at the tables were women. Two men were not there at all, though a prodigiously fat boy was coming in at the door. Swinging at her side her left hand was light and unfamiliar. Twice!

Her memory retraversed the course she had taken, and now that she was here she saw that all along she had been coming here. Ever since she had hidden the rings she had been coming. Twice, in this place, she had concealed her rings.

She prepared for the coming of remorse. It did not come. As she returned on the street car to her room her spirit sang with the crescendo of the motors, soaring on when they attained satiety, and opened above dim places.

At home she took the rings out of the drawer and handled them. She put them on. They were white and gold and very pretty there. But that was all.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOMERS

I

ONE night in a restaurant she met Somers again. He had already seen her and was advancing, his face molded in a smile that set two rolls of flesh about his mouth. His yellow "lay-back" glistened under the lights. As he came to her table his face sobered, and he held out his hand. "I'm very glad to see you again, Mrs. Shuman," he said.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Somers. Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks. Just a minute. Got an appointment at eight, but I always have a little time to chat with a friend, I guess."

Arlie was too busy with memory to reply, and while she thought, her face became wistful. Somers fumbled with the silverware until she roused herself. "Well, what are you doing now?"

"Still looking for a show-shop."

"Aren't you going to run the Bijou any more?" It was an effort to refer to the place, or to anything in Coon Falls, but Somers had always remained apart from the town, perhaps because he had come there from Sioux City, perhaps because she had never caught him watching her, speculating. . . . Always he had been easy, kind, and very polite.

"No." He turned her question over. "No, I'm not running it any more. Can't stand the old man. You know how he is. Thinks I'm trying to rob him all the time. Won't let me put any life into the old place. It's run down awful now. Say!"

"Yes?" The running-down of the Bijou was the only knowledge she had had of Coon Falls in a year. Coming as a disastrous touch to the whole town it quickened her. "How long's it been since you were there?" she asked.

"Oh, I been in Des Moines about six weeks now."

"Yes? I was here before that. Funny we didn't meet. Though I don't know either, it's such a big place."

He smiled. "Ever been to Chi? No? Well, don't call this burg big then. . . . Listen, what you doing now yourself?"

"You knew Mr. Shuman died, didn't you? In an auto accident . . . the very day you were in Finley."

"Yes, I heard about it when I was leaving. Meant to tell you when I come over how sorry I was. . . . Say, that was pretty tough, Mrs. Shuman. It sure was. You seem to have had enough bad luck, too."

She had bent her head at his first words, but with his last she raised it, ready to flare into invective. So many times, in her racing imagination, she had crushed Mrs. Wentlings. She summoned the words now, but they sank back as she looked at him. There was surely no malice in the face so lugubriously downcast. All her powder had been wasted, and this, the only certain reference to those months, had not been made by a cat of a woman but by a man. She would have to be angry artificially if she were angry at all. But what was the use? He was so surely sincere and tender. "Oh, I don't know," she answered at last. "Of course it's been hard, awful hard, to lose Herb. Nobody'll ever know. . . ." She choked a little, then went on: "But as for luck, Mr.

Somers, most people mean money by luck, and I haven't had bad luck that way. Herb left me quite a little, and then there's the allowance from the—the estate, you know." ("Estate" was a beautifully impressive word.) "I've never had so much to spend. Clothes and everything." Her eyes glittered over his very respectful face. "I'm not happy, though. I couldn't be. I want . . . what I had, you know—" She broke off.

When she looked up again tears were in her eyes. He was still putting spoons together, absent-mindedly, and his face was soberer. His eyes, meeting hers, were blue, transparent, tender. "I know," he said. "I know just how you feel. I just been there myself, you know. It was pretty hard for me, too, to lose Jessie. I—I can't tell you—"

"To lose Jessie! . . . Is Jessie . . . ?"

"Didn't you know? Why yes, Jessie, she died last April. I supposed of course you—"

"Jessie!" Her lips broke to a wild grin that, as she grew conscious of what she was doing, she contorted into a grimace of sorrow; and to the substantiation of that she forced a gulp that for an instant would not let her speak. "Jessie . . ." she said. Her contracting brow and throat began to draw from within the recently absorbed tears. Looking through her grief, even as she conjured it to become real, an isolate self watched Somers: had he caught that grin before she changed it, before . . . before she had truly realized what he had said, before she *knew*, before . . . ? She couldn't have grinned. She couldn't in any way have meant to grin. A twitch of the muscle, that was all. You can't always control such things. No, she hadn't grinned. . . . An undivided and deceived self inquired into his face. "Poor, poor Jessie," she said, extending both her hands until they lay near the silverware he was still fingering. . . . Long hands, colder than his own had been. . . .

"She was sick so long. She had such a *hard* time."

"I supposed you knew," he said, looking at her with a strange timidity, and she was very sure it was the first time he had looked at her since he had spoken of Jessie's death.

"No, no, I didn't. Truly I didn't." (But for what was she apologizing, she wondered, suddenly questioned by that impishly star-like self floating out from the mists and brightening. Cover it!)

"Yes, she died last April. It was mighty hard. . . . But I got to be going now." He looked at his watch. "Can't I put you on the street car?"

The wind was stirring the street air with a pale, reviving cold. He helped her on the car, but when she turned to wave another word of good-bye he was beside her on the platform. "I thought I'd just ride out with you," he said. "See that you get home all right. My appointment can wait."

They said very little to each other, and Arlie was glad when at last they started to walk up the long hill under the frosty pallor of the stars. At the porch he asked for her telephone number. "Since we're here we might chat a little, don't you think, about Coon Falls and everything? . . . I'll call you up."

The next morning she tried to weave into a chain thoughts that were circles of steel, remaining hard and separate. How might she find out whether he had seen that grin—if it had really been a grin—and how could she make him understand that you just did those things, all at the wrong time, like that first night she had been in Des Moines and had given way to such senseless laughter? She might approach it indirectly, leading him on to admit that sometime he had laughed like that. But had he noticed? Maybe it would be better to let it drop. What difference did it make, anyway? He was nothing to her but some one she had known, and known in Coon

Falls at that. This was Des Moines. She went out to lunch.

2

He telephoned the following evening, and as she went down to answer she knew she had been waiting for the call. They ate dinner at the restaurant where they had met, and talked for an hour before they sought a moving picture show. He was looking for a house of his own, he explained again. Jessie had left him a few hundred, and he had a little of his own, but not enough, all told, to get the house he wanted. "I want a house in a live town. No more Coon Falls for me. Something in a town like Mason City or Waterloo or Fort Dodge. I don't need the best house in a city like that. I ain't afraid of a little competition. Just a chance to buck these old boys a little—that's all I ask. . . . Take the ushers in this here house. Why not have a nifty little uniform? And cut out the pie-face in this aisle. Those things count, I tell you; but Great Smoke, I couldn't tell Tritchler that. He'd just roll his eyes and let a little more tobacco juice dribble down his chin whiskers. He'd just go to sleep under a little competition. I'd give him about a week and he wouldn't have ten people in the house. All he'd know to do would be to cut prices, and he couldn't stand it to cut."

"He's awful funny and queer, I always thought," Arlie supplemented.

"Sure, sure thing. What could a man with ideas do with him? Just ground down all the time. I tell you, the motion picture business in the small town ain't been worked right. Just benches instead of decent seats, for instance. And they don't work the town right. Why, they ought to get the town behind 'em. Work up farmer matinées for Saturday more. Run educational stuff with the schools, and have a religious film for Sunday after-

noons and the ministers talking about it before and offering up a peppy little prayer. Keep that up a year or two and see what you got! Get it?"

"N-no."

"Why they got the *habit*, see? The Sunday habit. And you ain't lost any money, because after the first month you started a collection. Then after a while you called a meeting of the old birds and proposed a nominal charge, see? Then, when the people really got the habit why you cut it off for a while—not too long—and then get your friends to start a petition to the council, see? And there you are, running full blast, seven days a week. . . . But you don't see Tritchler playing any game like that. No sir, he's too slow in the head, that guy is."

3

"When can I see you again?" he asked on the porch that night.

"Tomorrow?"

"Good. I'll be around about six, say, and we'll eat."

4

"But why don't you get a theatre and put some of these ideas into practice?" she asked Somers two evenings later as they finished dinner. (She had already forced him to let her pay for her own.)

"Great God, girl! that's just what I'm trying to do, but I ain't got the money."

"I see."

"It's this way. I got a little of my own, and a little that an aunt left Jessie. But it ain't enough to get what I want."

"Can't you borrow?"

"Well, I'll tell you: it's this way. I'll tell you the

whole thing. I got in bad up in Sioux City. Had a little jewelry store in the old days and I went broke. Went through bankruptcy, see?"

She didn't, but nodded as if she understood completely.

"And you go through bankruptcy and you can't get money easy unless you get it from a friend; and most of them want to talk about the weather. Now see how it is—sometimes a man gets an idea that the people aren't ready for. Good idea, you know, but the time ain't ripe. That's something you can't control. That's the way it was with me. My idea was *too* good, that's all, and I went broke. Then we went to Coon Falls and I got interested in the show business again, Jessie died, and here I am. . . . I don't want to boast, of course, but sometimes a man has to take stock of himself, and ex—evaluate himself, and it does seem to me I got more good ideas about the picture show business than any one in Iowa. Yes sir, I think I have."

"Well, I think you have too, Mr. Somers. It's surely all right to have faith in yourself."

"I'm glad you look at it that way. I don't want you to think I'm just throwing the bull."

She was quieter than usual at the show that evening, and when he said on the porch that the time had gone too quickly she asked him to come in.

For the first minutes she was nervous, for while she felt sure the landlady had gone to bed there was no telling, and she didn't want her to come in, or to discover their presence. "Let's not wake anybody," she cautioned as his deep voice became more and more interested in his ideas. His lowered tones pleased her, and he was very handsome as he sat on the edge of the blueflowering cone of light from the reading-lamp. His hands, as he gestured with his cigarette, were pale but strong and warm—as she recalled; he always shook hands when he came or departed.

Her thoughts drifted with the dim canopy of blue-gray smoke that eddied above the lamp and wavered toward the ceiling. Then she watched the pallor of his hands, not heeding what he said.

She dreamed that night of Gerald, who for a while tugged at her breast as she nursed him, and then, full fed, dropped as of old, a ripe fruit from the bough, and relaxed himself in her arms to let her stroke his hair . . . until it lay back on his head yellow and glossy. He advanced toward her pale, strong hands and she woke to midnight and idle time, hugely flowing.

Clearly out of the darkness grew the face of her baby again, becoming Herb. Inexplicably it was Somers, then Gerald, wistful and distant. From the chasmy possibilities of that face she tried to hide herself, crawling back in terror as if from the edge of a precipice.

5

Subtle disflavors ran in her blood that day, and as she read or wandered through the stores, trying the library and again Grand Avenue, a dull consciousness persisted that something had been left undone. Somewhere a door was pushed to, but was not latched ; and she couldn't find it to snap it shut.

Toward evening she felt that she would have to go to find Somers if he didn't come, and he had not said that he would. She postponed going to dinner, hoping he would call. By nine he had not come and had not telephoned. Dinnerless she went to bed, tossing through harsh hours to a thin, bleak morning.

The day was angular and bitter as yesterday had been, piling to a crisis of angular moods as dinner time approached—straight lines and gray. Even his coming did not relieve her. In his presence she was only the more fully aroused to expectation. All doors were closed

and the air of life stale. She wanted an opening.

When he settled himself, gesturing, by the blue lamp, she realized that down a suddenly discovered hall stood the door opening out. Down the hall she rushed: "How much, Mr. Somers, do you think it would take to get the kind of theatre you'd need?"

"Let's see. . . . It'd have to be in a town of over fifteen thousand, you know, and I'd have to have a fairly good location. Can't get that easy now in a city like Des Moines or Sioux City. You want something like Mason City, or Cedar Rapids, or Ft. Dodge. You'd probably want to do some redecorating if you bought. . . . I don't know, maybe three thousand or so with what I got would get me started."

"Would two thousand help any?"

"Might give a chance to get something. If I'd got that much I could raise more, I guess. It wouldn't be just what I'd want, but . . . yes, that would give a chance, all right."

She was fumbling at the knob of the door.

"You know, I got some bank stock that isn't working. I mean, I could raise money on it and lend that."

He was silent, his interested face waited.

"I don't know just how," she went on, "but I guess I could find out."

"Oh, sure, that's easy," he said very softly, as if not to mar the perfection of what was forming.

"I'd have to write about it. . . . But I believe in your ideas, Mr. Somers. I think they'd pay. Maybe they'd make me a little money as well as you. We could work out some kind of agreement."

"Say, Mrs. Shuman, I didn't think you had it in you! I never thought *you'd* be a business woman! You were too pretty and all for that. No sir, I didn't suppose you had it in you! . . . But say,"—he leaned forward expressively—"I don't want you to think I was going to ask

you for anything like that. Didn't even know you had the stock. . . . You were just an old friend I could sorta clear up my ideas on. You see, don't you?"

A clean wind was blowing through the open door, flushing her face with brightness.

"Oh," she protested, "I didn't think *anything* like that. It's just a business proposition. I can have an idea or two myself, can't I?" She laughed. It was good to laugh because she was happy, and the wind was blowing to a distance all that was old and stale. . . . "I'll write," she said at last, when he was leaving, "and find out about it. But you come back, because we'll want to talk things over."

She composed a letter to the Shumans in the morning, asking them to send on her certificate of stock, but she gave no reasons. With the letter posted she felt content, and the present began to hum a little now that the future was drawing it taut.

6

The Shumans replied at once, but did not send the stock. Mr. Shuman couldn't get in to the safety deposit box for a few days. Wouldn't it be better for her to confer with them before she did anything with it? Mrs. Shuman hoped Arlie wasn't going to give it up for any of the oil stocks being peddled. They were all frauds.

Arlie regretted that she hadn't taken complete charge of her own affairs, rather than leaving them largely to Mr. Shuman. She replied curtly that she wanted the stock; she was not going to invest in oil or anything else. "A loan isn't an investment," she told herself. Somers she told nothing—except that they would have to wait a few days more. He asked no questions.

Instead he talked and planned. They went to shows afternoon and night now, Arlie always insisting on paying her own way. She rose in the morning with a sense

of occupation. Her lethargy was gone; she no longer slept until noon.

At night they returned to the living-room, which usually was vacant, and there was more talk, more planning.

"Now that I begin to see this thing shape up," Somers said one night, "I get all sorts of ideas. I tell you, it's going to be a great little old house." He paced the room, fingered soft chords on the piano, and sat down on the stool. "You know, playing the pictures is the right idea, but it don't go far enough. What you want first is a place for people to come to to get away from everything homelike. 'Different from Home'—that wouldn't be a bad slogan, would it, if it weren't for getting all the ladies' aids down on you? But that's right, just the same. Pretty girl ushers, thick carpets on the aisle, and perfume. Maybe you noticed how different the houses smell. Some of 'em musty as a cellar—just like people. Now that ain't the right idea at all. First you want good fresh air. Then you want to perfume it. Shut your eyes and let me take you to any good house here and you'll know right away where you are. Now why woudn't this be the right gag? Find out from the druggists which is the most popular perfume, then use it. See what happens? Every time a fellow goes with his girl he gets to thinking of your theatre, see? Nothing like a smell to take you some place. Naturally he comes, and comes again when he ain't with the girl. Furthermore, wherever the perfume goes your ad goes with it."

"But people get tired and change," Arlie objected, seriously.

"Sure, and there's nothing to prevent your changing with 'em, is there?"

"I see."

"That's all right then, only I got some ideas that are worth two of that. . . . Or would you rather hear of 'em some other time?"

"They're awfully interesting, only I'm not sure I always get them, see just how they would really work out, I mean. . . . Suppose you play something." She rose and stood by him at the piano. "I haven't heard any good music for a long time."

He looked up at her. She felt that she was dominating him, that he was smaller, even in his bigness. He stood up. "Listen, girl, I been wondering about you. Where are you bound for, anyway? What are you doing in Des Moines?"

"Nothing." She was herself and small again.

"But you must have something in mind. What is it?"

"No, nothing. I'm just here. It's the only place I know to be."

"Are you going to bring the kid down here, or are you going back?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought. I ought to, but I can't somehow. It's like a trunk that's too heavy to move. You just look at the handle."

"But you don't have to think about some things. . . . Money, for instance."

"No, and it's the first time, too. Though my allowance isn't going to go as far as I thought it was."

"No? You get a good bit, don't you? I mean, you're not going to starve or anything."

"I'm not going to starve, no. Not on a hundred a month."

"Oh . . . that's what you get, is it? Seems to me they might have . . . Still, that's more'n most girls make."

"That doesn't include Gerald, you know. It's just for me, and I have the bank stock beside and some other things. Those keep going on always."

"Yes?" Somers contemplated his smoke.

"The allowance stops, of course, if I ever marry."

"Oh well," Somers drew the words back out of the

smoke. "We'd be making enough money by that time, anyway. . . . I mean," his tone hastened, "I mean the loan, you know, and all. With you in on it it'd be a company, a sort of partnership, you see. We'd be making a lot of money, you and I, by the time you'd want to marry, so if the right fellow come along, why you'd have enough. . . . I mean the right fellow would have the kale, of course. But to help out, to make you independent."

She accepted his self-rescue by turning the talk back on Coon Falls, and in twenty minutes he left. With one mind she summoned a good-night; with another she worked to recall the exact words he had used. They were not very clear, he had talked so much in the succeeding minutes.

The words were clear enough in the morning, however, and she was relieved when Somers did not appear for two days. With knowledge of his plans she began to make some of her own: a quick return to Lawson for Gerald, and winter with her parents in Coon Falls. She couldn't marry. Especially she couldn't marry Somers. To marry at all would be to do what the Shumans wanted, and that would be disloyalty to Herb, even if they were his parents. But she didn't want to marry. Wouldn't. She saw herself as once before: slim and made beautiful by pain, ageing in a loyalty cleansed by the pain of years, beautiful as a colored light losing its colors and refining to a hueless brilliance; in that she would find death and life, at the end of years.

She would go to Coon Falls. Gerald would be with her, he would go to school there, grow up; together they would go on walks, read, talk; and go down Main Street together, past Horack's Grocery, Nolte's Jewelry Store, and the amber blaze above the Bijou. They would go often to see the pictures, and old man Tritchler.

She would go to Coon Falls. . . .

Another letter of inquiry came from the Shumans. She wrote again demanding the stock; it was hers and they were to send it at once. With the letter mailed she felt better. It would be giving in to them not to get it before she left. That might prevent her departure for a few days, but it was wholly necessary.

In Coon Falls she would take Gerald to the Bijou every evening.

7

Two nights later Somers appeared again.

"You're lucky to find me here," she told him. "I was just going out."

"Yes? . . . Well, I been busy for a day or two writing some ads for a fellow. Needed the money. . . . Say, let's not go down town. The old lady ain't around. Let's just chin a little."

She led the way into the living-room, thinking that it didn't greatly matter what they did. She might tell him there had been a hitch in getting the stock, that the Shumans refused to send it until they had seen her. As she contemplated that move, in her blind imagination Somers softened, diminished; became plastic, something easily handled. But when she turned to him he was standing, uncannily solid, by the table: he was not going to be so easy to manipulate as she had supposed. To treat him as she had momentarily dreamed would be—inconvenient.

His first words made it even harder. "Have you heard from the Shumans yet?"

"Yes, I—they're going to send it in a few days. Mr. Shuman's been sick."

"Too bad." He sat down.

There was crescendo of silence, and at its peak he looked at her. His eyes were darker, shadowed by question, good yet difficult to look into. Frankly they asked her if he were going to have the chance he wanted, if he

were to be lifted out of what he had endured but what he had never let her suspect before. Perhaps he had not let himself know it too often; he would have brightened it over with his ideas. She understood now, floodingly, and she looked back into his intricate eyes until they grew simple, round, receiving, and she was indrawn mothlike to a point of light on one of them that—even as she intently watched—was the focus of a sudden roaring cone of soft darkness that shut out and became the whole universe. . . . It broke, and his face appeared smoothly, solidly before her, a face to touch with inexplicable tears. Her eyes dropped then, as if they had spoken some word that were better withheld, but which it had been comfortable to utter.

“I hope,” he began, “that it does come, soon.”

She made, at that point, a trip to Lawson and returned with the stock. “It’ll be here,” she affirmed. “Don’t worry.” But she wanted it then, to produce it magically, as long before she had drawn from behind her back one of Phil’s toys, to the sudden healing of his distress. At the time she had felt clean and possessed of quietness, as she felt now, in her sureness about the stock. Yet Somers’s going to the piano and striking only a few chords stirred with lights and shadows the blue quiet of her mood. Her serenity became a delicate fever.

“Don’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” She held out a hand through the darkness come about her; it was grasped. She rose and went to him blindly, with a little cry. An old dark wine was mounting to her head, flashing as it came, and through a whirl and dim commotion she was held. She had come home.

“Don’t, Somers, don’t,” she whispered.

“I can’t help it, I . . .”

“We shouldn’t.”

"But why? What can we do?"

They had moved instinctively to the hall and stood before the hat rack. Wordlessly she fingered at his coat. He reached for his hat and stepped toward the door.

"Tell me," she said, when a tense, sensitive space was between them; then she crossed that to be near him: "Tell me, what's your *first* name. I can't remember."

"Ed," he replied, and opened the door, "Good-night, Arlie."

"Good-night," she answered.

As she went upstairs she heard the landlady and her son returning from somewhere, but it was not until an hour later when they passed her door on their way to their beds that she realized she had heard them.

CHAPTER XIX

INFIDELITY

I

SHE was kept long in bed by the broken glamour of dreams and memory; Somers was still at the piano, making resonances that were like voices in her; she was saying "Don't"—and there was union with him. Yet she missed, in each dreaming rehearsal of that union, the surprised discovery of a dark elation that made everything right. She dreamed through it again—and again; but each time she missed what she needed to absolve her from the past that was flying nearer. Herb obstinately persisted, as if he were alive, distant only a few miles, and coming to her quickly. The knowledge of his coming was her own expectation.

Yet why should she be disturbed? It was right for her to love again, to marry again. After two or three years no one would say or think anything. But time was—the number of days and months didn't matter. What mattered was your own feelings, and how much you lived. She felt herself distant from Lawson and Finley by the broadest widths of time she had known. Not even her pregnancy had seemed longer.

Herb had no right . . . he who had made her suffer so, and had not married her for all she could say, but, going to California, had left her to a horror of winter. He had no right now to insist, as he was insisting, by his

helplessness, by his straightness and white face of silence. It was unfair of him to be dead. . . . But it had not been Herb, it had been herself, those nights. She had clung to him in the car, urging him to greater speed. That it had been imperfect and humiliating had been her fault more than his. Then there had come, under the trees, starlit completion, and she had drawn him to her arms again. He was dead now.

Yes, but he did have a right; in so far as she had been unreluctant he had a right—no! only a right to persist with a white face in the earth's darkness, but not to rob her. It was enough that he should always subtract something from her life; too much that in his death he should annul all that might come to her—just by his infinite helplessness.

The December sunrise was embossing the low sky with flamy clouds, and under it the city was black and drab, and white with snow. It was a sky over her own day, not his. She sprang out of bed . . . it was her own day . . . and exulted so in the cold of the room that she did not close the window until she had dressed.

That night she and Ed ate crackers and chocolate in a secluded booth down town. When only a few remained in the front part of the store he drew her to him again. With that, she was cleansed, music rose and fell, flute music, dying into her flesh. Then something began to go wrong in her, and she roused her mind to find herself pitying Herb. Even here he followed. Was it faithlessness in her? Why was it? Whatever it was, she couldn't be at peace in Ed's arms, but only listless, silent.

"What's the matter?" he asked softly.

"I don't know. I'm tired, I guess."

"What you been doing today?"

"Nothing. Funny, isn't it, I'd be tired?"

"Maybe you worry too much. Shouldn't do that. Come here."

Instead she drew away and adjusted her hair. "Let's go home," she said.

"Not on your life. It's never late till it's early. Let's have another chocolate."

She acquiesced, hoping he would say something of marriage. That might set things straight. That would make her more faithful to Herb, if he did. This loving . . . it was wrong. It might make Somers think what he shouldn't. If they were married, though, her faithlessness would be more faithful, somehow. . . . It was all a circle, a yanking merry-go-round. What sense was there in such a thought as that, anyhow?

But he did not speak of marriage, and on the porch at last she refused to kiss him good-night. Was it always to be twisted? Was she always to be cheated? Her youth, her greenness, and her miserable pregnancy had cheated her with Herb; and was Herb, with all that had gone before, going to cheat her now? Or was it Somers who was denying her? . . . She wanted to throw to the floor the brush and comb tray on her dresser, or to hurl a bottle of perfume at the window. She needed to smash, smash . . . Something had to be ground satisfactorily to bits. In a fury she gasped and shook herself, and pounded on the bed, wanting to scream . . . until she lay exhausted and panting.

2

"I'll have the stock by tomorrow," she told him that evening, "if you think you can still find use for it."

"Is that so?" he asked eagerly. "Say, that's great. I just heard today of a dandy house. Over in Grand Forks—livest town in Iowa. Twenty-five thousand, they claim; probably have twenty-one or two. Stucco, the house is; holds four or five hundred, and I can get it

cheap. Things can begin to move, right now. It won't be just ideas I'll be having, it'll be a House!"

"I'm glad. . . ."

They became enthusiastic. Arlie began to feel proprietorship. Dropping the "I," each said "we." It was another light turned on.

Ed stopped in his pacing to sit on the arm of her chair. He drew her against himself. His hand cupped her chin, made it feel small, made her bend to him pliantly. "But say, Arlie, I can't do this alone. I got to have more'n your money—invested, I mean. I want you, kid. What do you say? Why not make this clinch for good?"

It had come, but it did not right matters as she had expected. It seemed that there was nothing she wanted that she was going to have, and nothing she had that she very much wanted. Maybe marriage with him would become the satisfaction she had missed. Yet he should have asked her before—this, even as she knew, with her head slipping lower on his breast, that when next he asked she would answer yes.

"Listen, Arlie, what do you say? You know I want you. I think you want me, don't you?"

She freed her head to nod.

"I knew it," he said softly. "And you'll marry me?" She nodded again.

"When will you?"

"Whenever you want me to." There was comfort in having him decide; but he did not decide. They'd talk of it later, he said, and began again on "the house" and Grand Forks. She listened wearily. It was not what she wanted to hear. She wanted to ask him about Jessie. Perhaps that would let her know better about Herb, and how to think of him. If it weren't for Mrs. Shuman she would be freer. To marry would be to cut adrift from the Shumans—and to give Herb back to his mother. Yet could she have both Herb and Ed? . . . It couldn't

have been the same with Ed and Jessie. No use to ask.

"What is it?" he inquired shortly. "What are you thinking about? Don't you want to talk about these things?"

"I was . . . just a little worried," she began. "I—I lied to you a little, Ed. About the stock."

His face changed. "Yes?"

"It's not coming tomorrow."

"Oh. . . ."

"It's here, now. It's upstairs."

The old smile came out. "Oh!" But how different.

"I didn't mean to tell you, but I couldn't help it. It came this morning. I'll get it."

When she returned he was improvising at the piano and would not look at the certificate. "What does it matter?" he said. "It's here." She insisted, however, and when he had looked he began on the film service he would get. "None of this here year old stuff for me. I'm no Tritchler."

3

"I'll have to go to Lawson for Gerald," she told him just before he left that night.

"Sure," he answered, after he had turned to the door, "we'll want the little one." Then he came back to kiss her again.

What had been the expression on his face when he turned to the door? If only she could have seen! Had he forgotten Gerald altogether? Didn't he want him, or did he feel sorry for him? "The little one," he had called him.

4

She had originally intended to get a lawyer's advice about lending the money, but now she wanted only to

have it done quickly. She telephoned Ed in the morning to make any arrangements that were necessary. Later he came out after her. "What's the shortest way?" she asked, after he had explained the different things they might do.

"The shortest would be to just sign it over . . . here."

"Give me your pen."

"But maybe you'd better—"

"Give me your pen!"

It had been a burden as long as Ed needed it, she told herself.

5

At lunch he returned indirectly to the matter of their marriage. "The option will mean I'll have to go up there before the week is out, and I don't know why you shouldn't go with me. Do you?"

"You mean, be married this week?"

"I mean this afternoon."

"I couldn't do that."

"Why not? What does it all mean, anyway? Why be apart any longer than we got to? We love each other, don't we? and there's no one to ask except us. Listen, why not?"

"But I don't have Gerald."

"What of it? You can get him later. Or you could go by way of Lawson, afterwards, and meet me in Grand Forks. This afternoon we slip up to Boone on the interurban and get married and come back tonight."

What would it matter, after all? Maybe the sooner the better was right. She didn't want to slip back into that chasm of time from which Ed had lifted her. She would never have been able to climb out. "I wish we didn't have to talk about it here," she said. But no one could hear them at their table in the corner. Why had she said that? What was it she wanted? She was an-

noyed at her own futility, and at the wants bristling out of her vacancies. Dully she forked her salad, recalling remote dull images, knowing again old pressures, Ed's hands upon her. She could recall the circumstances of her love for him, but not the love itself. She was feeling lonelier than ever, as if all life were going to pass her by unless she reached out to hold it.

She advanced her hand toward him, hesitatingly, with tears gathering in her eyes. That loneliness might overtake her even yet. Her fingers clawed delicately at the tablecloth, nearer to him and nearer. "I'll go," she said, "this afternoon."

There were tears in her eyes. Was there more to say now? The time would never return: "And Ed . . . you'll be good to me, won't you, always?"

His face was very handsome as he replied, and his eyes shone with a kinder blue than she had ever seen there. "Arlie, I'll make you the happiest woman in the world. By God, I will!"

The tears coming now made her withdraw her hand. Unobtrusively she touched her handkerchief to her eyes. "It's silly of me, I know," she apologized, "but it means so much, Ed. You *know* it means so much."

Words he had been about to say were not spoken. They were withheld behind the questioning of his face, in which tender assurance had given place to an almost amused comprehension. Her thought ran back—what was it he was suspecting, or understanding? As she puzzled her pose broke and she understood that her last tears had been artificial, that she had been theatrically assuming an innocence and playing on it. She had not had the chance with Herb. Then her thought glanced from too full an awareness of her deception of herself, and, possibly, of Ed. He really had led her into it. She clenched her hand, she would hit. . . . Yet when he rose from the table and stood ready with her coat, smiling

down at her, she touched him unnecessarily under cover of the garment. Confidently he took her arm, and she let him support her as they walked out.

7

The ride on the interurban to Boone became a flight through white places. The snow was glazed in the western distance by the setting sun. The car bumped and swayed and raced like a runaway, as if it were abetting them.

In Boone, after an interminable ride on a miniature street car, they came to the courthouse. In half an hour they had been married by a justice of the peace, and in the evening returned to Des Moines.

The ride was dreary, and long before the end Arlie was wretchedly tired. For the last fifteen miles she slept on Ed's shoulder. In Des Moines they went directly to a hotel.

When the bell-hop had left the room Ed took her hand in his and kissed it. "Arlie," he said, "I don't want you to be afraid. I'm going to take awful good care of you, dear. Honest I am. You know that, don't you, and believe it?"

"Of course I do." She was just beginning to wonder why they had taken such a long trip, and a useless one, when they might have been married so conveniently in Des Moines. But the trip had been taken, there was small use in discussing it . . . and he had asked more questions than she had answered. What were they?

"But you won't, will you? Be afraid, I mean, of life with me?"

"Be afraid of life with you?"

"Well . . . I mean, I suppose, just of me?"

She had disengaged her hand from his to recline into her chair; in the sombre shadow beyond the dull light

her dress relapsed into dark lines about the firm obscurity of her figure; the face she lifted to him was pale with an inner fatigue he could not suspect, and newly hard and thin. "Come here," she answered. He came, bending over and enveloping her with his shadow and presence. She would summon the old blindness if he staid with her. Her arms went about his head, drawing him closer. . . . Wasn't it going to come . . . ? "Ed, oh . . . I won't be afraid of you. Not of you. . . . Hold me, hold me!"

CHAPTER XX

TRIANGLE

I

"BUT my dear girl," said Mrs. Shuman, "there's no need on earth of your doing that. You have plenty to live on, and if you haven't we can make it enough."

Though knowing she could not accept, Arlie looked at the dry gift for a moment before rejecting it: "I don't want more. I have enough. What I want is something to do."

"Then why not go on with your education? You could go to the university, or go east to school if you wanted to, and Gerald could stay with us, just as he has." In her earnestness Mrs. Shuman leaned forward her tall, sallow face.

"I could go east . . . ? I . . . I don't want to."

"Why not?—Or why not the university, then? That's near, and you could get home to see Gerald, often as you wanted to. Think what it would mean to him in later years if you had an education."

"Herb didn't have."

"He had two years at Ames, and would have had more if he hadn't married."

It had come too late, but not so late as to avoid an instant's feverish stir of old impulses—fading memories of pages read and turned to fresh characters, fugitive interests. But Ed was waiting for her in Grand

Forks, her husband was waiting. Just to clear herself she wanted to tell Mrs. Shuman about him, to break through the dirty coil of protection she had woven and was still weaving, and would even now strengthen: "I can't help that. I don't want it. I got a good job in Grand Forks and I can save all I make. I don't want to be a drain on you always."

"Oh well." Mrs. Shuman settled back to her book and Arlie went to look for Gerald.

She wished she might go that night, but had said she would not go yet for a day or two, not until they had talked it over. They had: the necessity, the wisdom, the respectability of work in a moving picture show, the difficulty of caring properly for Gerald, even with the help of the aunt who was supposed to live in Grand Forks—and the only results were apparent obstinacy on her part and increased coolness on Mrs. Shuman's. At any moment something might turn up to let them know the truth—that she was married. Why had she given in to Ed when he had explained the trip to Boone? They ought to lose the allowance somehow—but to give it up by her own action would be wrong to Ed. Unless she could make them so mad, by little things, that they'd stop it anyway, without knowing. Still, that wouldn't be playing square with Ed, either.

At first she had turned sick at Ed's explanation, but he had argued so plausibly. If they had been married in Des Moines the notice would have been in the Des Moines papers, to which he had been sure the Shumans subscribed. They would see it, and the allowance would stop. They needed that money; at least they needed the loan of it for the first months, if the show was to be well started. The right film service would cost tremendously, uniforms for the ushers, countless things; and there was no use in starting if they couldn't start right. After a year or so they could pay it all back. It was

really no more than a loan; and after all she'd gone through she deserved at least that much. Well . . . as a loan, to be paid back as soon as possible . . . she had given in, and after the second day had come for Gerald.

"Say 'mama' boy," she coaxed, as he started for the door of the bedroom, her old room and Herb's.

He turned to look at her with innocent solemnity. "Gama," he said.

"No, no, Gerald, say 'mama, mama.' Say that."

"Gama," he reiterated, and pried at the door with chubby, futile fingers. At last it swung softly open and he trotted off without a backward glance. She heard him letting himself, step by step, down the stairs, then the tudge-tudge of his feet on the floor, and his grandmother's voice: "Well, my precious one! Did he want to see his old Gama?"

Beneath the hurt in her heart a sinister small light increased. Part of her plan would work. Mrs. Shuman at least would be broken up to have Gerald go; his probable going was already making her fertile in plans. Mr. Shuman didn't seem to care. He had hardly smiled since she returned, though it might be because of his neuritis.

She looked about the room at the few changes. Because she had not made them herself she felt out of place, and knew an alien quality in the room. Perhaps it was right that she should. For anything of Herb's to belong to her would be wrong, now; and to sleep there again, haunted by midnights, would be almost as much as she could stand. Discord of dark and blond that made each wrong, and made herself sunken, formless, miserable.

When she went down Gerald was playing with spools at Mrs. Shuman's feet.

"How did you find your family, Arlie? I forgot to ask."

She would have to lie again. Fortunately she had written to her mother when she first went to Des Moines, and her mother had replied—the only letter Arlie had ever received from her. "Oh, about the same. I was only there a little while, you know. Pa's got Bright's disease now. He didn't look at all well." She shouldn't have talked about it, she reflected. They might find out she hadn't been to Coon Falls at all, and it was enough to carry through the one big deception.

The next day she left for Grand Forks.

Gerald cried so at parting from his grandmother that Arlie could not quiet him until they were on the train. Even then it was by no device of her own, but with a bright silver clock Mrs. Shuman had tucked into the suitcase at the last minute. "He's always wanted to play with it," she explained, "and I've never let him have it. But it may help a little. He hates to leave his old Gama so!" She clutched the small form to her, sobbing brokenly until Gerald had twisted away to the bookcase, from which he pulled some farewell volumes. It was when they took him to the automobile and his grandmother staid behind that he began to cry, stretching back toward the diminishing figure of the woman on the porch, who waved a handkerchief white as the snow around her.

In the train he drowsed in Arlie's arms, still clutching the bright clock, and as the dreams flowed in and clouded his eyes she laid him straight on the opposite seat, his head on a small pillow. She turned to the flying landscape. The "plan" had not seemed so wise at the time; and after all, at the moment, it had hurt her to hurt Mrs. Shuman. It would mean a good deal to lose the adorable soft bloom helplessly sleeping to the tune of the clicking rails, and especially to lose him forever—as all had obscurely seemed to know that Mrs. Shuman was doing. Yet perceptibly rising now came the fumes from that sinister inner light; it broke to a whiteness of

steady flame: matters had been in a measure evened; she had beaten the woman, obstinately beaten her. The little victory sealed and completed her. Over the rails and through snowy fields pricked in black by desolate fences, she was going, she and her son, to Grand Forks.

PART THREE

CHAPTER XXI

IDEAS

I

"I'LL go on now, then." Ed crushed his cigarette on his lunch plate. "But you come before one, won't you?"

"I'll be there on time, don't worry," Arlie answered.

"We don't want to miss any time. Always on the dot, that's us. We'll get the jump on the other boys right off. A hell of a lot they know about picture shows. Heard Bunchie Mudge was talking about running daylight shows. Some new dodge he's heard of and thinks it'll work. I read about it—not long ago it was. But say! even if it would work that's all Bunchie knows! Daylight movies! Why, that's what gets 'em, the dark. You don't want no more'n moonlight inside. Show your pictures in daylight and no one'd come but blind men. Nobody'd believe in 'em. What you want to do is to make 'em think they're dreaming. That's where the perfume and the music comes in. Everything soft and dreamy. 'At the Isis Nothing's Like Home Except You—and You Forget Yourself.' Christ, I wish I could use some slogan like that! . . . Daylight movies . . . oh hell!

"Where you want your light," he added, after a moment's reflection, "is right where we got it on the Isis: out in front. That's the place for the big blaze. They flock to that sign like bugs. Look what the light did for the old Bijou—only good thing about it. You could see

it the other end of Main Street. But when you get inside—then nothing more'n enough to get 'em seated. And if some guy wants to hold his best girl's hand, or stick his elbow in her ribs, why no one knows it but her. . . . Not that you want a bad name for your house. Don't pay, any way you take it. You got to remember the ministers."

"Did you get the posters up this morning?"

"Sure. Good job, too. Twenty-four sheets, some of it. They'll fall heavy for this war stuff. . . . Sort of hate to make money on war stuff, too."

"Why, Ed! Why?"

"Oh, fellows killing each other off and here I sit on my pants over in America—all of us, for that matter, having jimjams; and some of us rake in the dollars showing pictures of the poor nuts hopping out of the trenches."

"But you're not worse'n any one else. It isn't our fight."

"No . . . well, that's right too, I guess. . . . But I got to go. You be along quick, and say,"—he stood with his hand on the doorknob—"maybe you better take the other side of the street. You know . . . and not seem to come from the same side even. Of course, it ain't necessary, if you don't want to."

"No," she answered. "I don't think I do."

He started to reply, but instead closed the door behind him. She saw that his face was thoughtful as he passed the window on the outer balcony, from which one descended by an outside stairway to the street. She looked back at the rooms: the long combined dining- and living-room in which she sat, with a door opening into the bedroom, and a door into the hall, which in turn opened on the outer platform. The bathroom was at the end of the hall. "Mighty convenient," Ed had urged. "Only three blocks to the Isis." But the vacant store-

room below still vexed her; she wanted people in it, coming and going. It would be less lonely.

2

This was the first time since they had been in Grand Forks that they had not gone to the Isis together in the afternoon, she to sell tickets and he to take them at the door, and generally to superintend. She had enjoyed those walks, intervals as they were of hope and quiet in the day's growth of duties and fatigues, for as they walked Ed became less talkative, never schemed, and was willing to discuss their personal selves a little, and to look forward to a bungalow on the outskirts of town, an automobile, a maid, books, and not only to the chain of "movie palaces" he was already talking about.

Now the walks had vanished in obedience to his counsel of perfection. "You got to have a pretty girl in the box office," he had insisted. "If I'm not pretty enough, Ed," she had answered, "maybe we could hire some one and I—I could learn to run the machine, maybe." Wherupon he had explained that she hadn't "got him," that he hadn't meant for a minute that she wasn't pretty, but that only: "Well, a man likes to have a pretty girl waiting on him rather than some pimple-face. When I was in Sioux City I used to go to a dairy lunch that had a girl behind the counter that had a pair of eyes and a neck with a curl on it, well, it was like that there musical moment on the victrola. When she left I quit going there. And if I'd heard she was married maybe I woulda quit anyway. Not all guys maybe, but me. And any man's going to do just that." Then, ten minutes later, "If we go together, everybody'll get to know we're married, and—"

"But what difference would it make?"

"All the difference in the world. Even if a man knows absolutely there's nothing doing he likes to think

there might be—that there's a chance—for some one, if not for him; and maybe him."

And so, on this first day of the new schedule, Ed had preceded her.

She didn't like it. She had much preferred the old arrangement; and in addition, while she felt no special repugnance at, but rather a secret interest in, being an invulnerable bait, she did not like to think that Ed could so early detach her from himself for even so short a period. And it had not been unpleasant to think that she might be pointed out as the wife of the new proprietor of the Isis.

With the lunch dishes washed she led Gerald across the hall to the smaller apartment of Mrs. Gelke, from whom they rented their rooms. Since the storeroom below was vacant Mrs. Gelke had been quite willing to obtain a little money for the care of Gerald, afternoons and nights, while Arlie was at work. She led a taciturn, dark existence in her rooms, bright only with the potted geraniums and the rich, glossy green of rubber plants in her south windows. Before Gerald's coming the plants had absorbed her, now Gerald was taking their place. A widow without children, she was reorganizing her life about the care of Gerald. Early she had persuaded Arlie to buy cloth, which she had made up into neat garments. They had been unnecessary—Gerald's grandmother had outfitted him lavishly—but the cost had been small and Mrs. Gelke insistent. When Gerald grew tired Mrs. Gelke rocked him to sleep, and then lay on the bed beside him. Often when he was not tired she would persist in rocking him until he dozed. Several times Arlie had tip-toed in to find Gerald asleep and Mrs. Gelke straight and peaceful by his side.

Having left Gerald Arlie descended the stairs, pensively letting go of her eyes until they focussed on some indefinite point beyond the surface of wood and cement

flowing dully beneath her motion—on some point in the gray inane beyond the row of dirty-eyed two- and three-story buildings that rose before her on the front of space. The buildings had always been that way. So they would always be, and as they grew into definition before her, lessening down the brick street in insipid variety, she no longer saw them but heard them—reiterating broken, cacophonous phrases, as if a phonograph were rounding in the same groove of a record.

At the dingy stucco front of the Isis she turned in, placed her coat and hat by Ed's, and took her place at the window. For a time few came, and she looked over a fresh copy of the "Isis Screen." This was a four page leaflet of gossip of coming pictures, moving picture stars, and a question-and-answer department for which Ed complied both questions and answers on Sunday mornings, urging her to frame questions. "Just ask anything," he would say; "anything you feel sorta curious about." Two or three times a day he would open the question-box he had set up, but so far he had found no inquiries. When Arlie wondered whether the leaflet were worth the expense, he replied only: "Don't judge the Isis by the Rex and the Garden and the Strand. *They* couldn't stand the expense, no. But it's going to place the Isis, see?"

She had argued no more. Besides, his methods were "getting results," and night after night when she counted the cash and announced the total, Ed would smile as if the sum were exactly the increase he had expected.

3

They were late in reaching home that night, and when Arlie had brought Gerald to his own bed and returned to the "big room" Ed had bent his head upon his arms folded upon the table.

"Tired, Ed? You better turn in."

He raised a slow face to look at her stupidly, until a broad, quiet smile reanimated him, and a childish, wistful look came into his eyes. "Dog tired, girl," and he shook his head slowly, seeming to answer some other question she had not heard.

"You work too hard. You don't need to do all these things. Take it slower. We're doing all right."

"I got to work, Arl. No other way. It's our big chance. But I'm all in tonight. Guess I won't sit up any longer."

When he had gone—he always seemed ponderous to her when he was tired—she still waited by the table, seeing herself getting breakfast in the morning, and doing housework before she went to the Isis. Yet she could not deny Ed the superfluities she was providing for him with her work and the allowance. He needed them to play with. A time might come, and would, when she could have a house again, sell no more tickets, and appear married as well as be married. A time would come.

For the present she was sufficiently married. Indeed there were moments when she felt a pale and vanishing sense of polyandry and was haunted by past moments. At dinner on Sunday there had risen from her plate some wayward odor of another year, momentarily re-creating the dining-room in Finley, the round table and its heavy silver. She had looked up expecting to meet Herb's face and to speak to him. Ed had been smiling at her in prelude to a new idea. The bare table asserted its squareness, the whole room instantly developed its barren and too solid individuality. Her whole identity wavered.

"They say that Bunchie Mudge—" he had begun.
"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," she gasped. "I—just felt a little faint."

Herb, where was he? She had mislaid him, but where? And why Ed?

"I thought you were going to faint," he said. "Sure you're all right?"

"Yes, sure. What was it you were going to say about Bunchie?"

4

As the months developed their relationship, she found Ed drawing from her a tenderness she had never known for Herb; she wanted to tend him, and took far better care of his colds, which were frequent, than he did himself. Indeed, he never seemed to know he had a cold, and when informed that he must wrap up more carefully or take a laxative would blankly ask why. "Say, guess I have, all right," he would answer. "Where are those pills?"

She was fond of his fondness for Gerald, whose Christmas he had made notable; even now, in the spring, he would frequently bring home some bright trifle to add to the already well stocked basket of broken dolls and playthings.

Her tenderness dominated now—after the first months. She had found in their marriage a delicious humiliation, and if no more the abandon that had come in January—wild with a cold of newness, strangeness, becoming instantly and ecstatically familiar—she did take a pervasive comfort in what became a ministration. Yet a fear was spreading in her that this might cease to be enough. It was to preserve this sense of service that she more meticulously extended her care for him, as if each collar and shirt laid out and pan of shaving water set on the gas plate were another charm performed against the vivification of that fear. The fear came to her only as an uneasiness, and as an impulse to escape it, to obliterate it,

by one more minutia of service. A blind, furtive weaving of hands.

5

It was this sense of an obligation she was paying bit by bit that made it easier for her to walk alone to the theatre; but as spring accelerated its tempo so that its presence was melodious even amid the brick walls and pavements that framed her life, she began to enjoy the walk for itself, and for its special and poignant loneliness that she could find at no other time. . . . She would imagine herself free and unmarried, and try to find herself in an unknown city, feeling its manifold, wayward tuggings, its throb and hum of a wide power—as she had felt when first alone in Des Moines. Each noon she attempted to paint with an alien color the persistent pavement and buildings, carefully holding them out of the focus of familiarity . . . but they would break through as their immitigable selves, and she was once more Arlie Gelston, Arlie Shuman, Arlie Somers, going to her ticket selling at the Isis, in Grand Forks, Iowa.

Then the effort and even the memory of the effort ceased: it was too hot—in the street and at home. It was hot even in the ticket booth of the Isis, though there Ed had rigged an electric fan, out of sight, so that she might present an appearance of breezy, youthful coolness. (He had taken the idea from some moving picture journal.) “And don’t be too particular about your hair,” he had advised. “Let a little of it blow. What we want to tell ‘em is that it’s cool at the Isis, cooler’n anywhere in town.” She agreed and did her best to look the part, even when the fan drove at her only a nervous stir of warmth.

6

On several occasions he had watched her as she passed

his office window, she realized one fall day—the thin young man with the pale forehead, heavy glasses, and long chin. She would be more observant tomorrow, she decided, and was: his chair was tipped against his desk, swung around to give him a view of the street along which she came. His newspaper he was too obviously not reading. She looked at him directly, his eyes wavered, and he bent to his reading. The next day, though in the same position, he did not look up; but when he bought his ticket at the Isis that night their eyes met, Arlie fumbled the change, and the gaze of each swung away at the same instant.

This brought her back to her earlier endeavor. Isolated she began to walk up the street at the end of the noon hour, trying to shake off all contacts of life, to be fresh and virginally young. She had disliked this interest at first, for she had failed to find any appeal in the weakness of his face, his shy brown eyes. As the days passed, however, the brief contact of their glances was wanted; it sent into each a formless meaning that lay—in Arlie—uncoded, untranslated, but tangible.

As summer passed and fall became bleak and dull with the approach of winter he came every night to the Isis, seeing some pictures two and three times. That was in itself a confession, though it was never worded: always he pushed his money across the glass with one finger upraised to signal his desire for one ticket, and as he took the change—there was always change—a glance flickered between them and he went on.

One night when long, cold winds fought and tumbled up the street he mumbled something about the weather. Arlie smiled in answer, and spoke a word herself on the next night. Occasionally thereafter he would chat for a moment about the pictures, what was coming and what was good—until Arlie put a stop to it herself.

She had gone in after closing the ticket window to

watch the film, seating herself in the back row near a radiator. Ed was at the piano, where he often went at the beginning of the last reel to play the remaining pictures as he thought they ought to be played. Tonight the piano girl had waited. With constant nods and great expressiveness he was talking to her, glancing at the pictures, and following with improvisations and medleys the movements on the screen. The girl—Seraphine Houghton, a compact brunette—was listening attentively to his instruction. Then the film vanished from the screen to let its square white eye glow blankly for a moment. The few remaining in the Isis departed, but Ed and the girl staid on, and he played snatches from this and that. “See?” he said, turning to her. She nodded. His voice had boomed out uncannily near and large in the empty house. Arlie heard the operator descending the stairs, and grew impatient for Ed to come. She was about to call out to him to hurry when she saw them standing and Ed helping Seraphine on with her coat. What they were saying Arlie could not distinguish, and did not try to, until with a suppressed gasp she sat up. Ed had put his arm about Seraphine’s shoulder and was coming up the aisle. That much she could make out even though the orchestra lights were dim. They did not see her where she sat, but as they approached the dim light shed from the rear Arlie saw his arm slip away and heard him advising her. “You can’t take a chance like that, Miss Houghton. It won’t do. You mustn’t get sick now. You’re the only girl in town who can play the pictures anywhere near right.” They had passed into the “foyer.” Seraphine was saying good-night, and Ed strode back down the aisle to switch off the lower lights and lock the exit door. Softly Arlie went out—out into the street, and when beyond the direct glare of the arc-light near the Isis, ran on into the cold darkness of the winter night.

"Why didn't you wait?" Ed asked when he came in.
"I looked all over for you."

"I was tired. I didn't want to wait for you."

"But why not? I sorta missed you. I wanted to talk."

"I'll bet!"

"Why Arlie, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why talk that way?"

She guarded her silence with tight lips; it should speak for her.

"Wha'd' you mean, Arlie . . . I . . ."

"Yes, *you* wanted to talk to Seraphine, and hold her a while and love her up. O my God! how *could* you, Ed?"

"Could you what?"

"Love her up, kiss her."

"I didn't."

"But you did. I saw you."

"You *saw* me. Where? Then you—where were you?"

"Oh, then—you, then—you. . . . Then you didn't go home?" she mocked. "No, I didn't. And I saw quite enough, I can tell you."

"But what?"

"I saw you put your arm around her, for one thing, coming up the aisle."

"Oh . . . you didn't see anything else though."

"That was enough."

"Yes, hell yes! But Arlie—no, look at me. That's absolutely all there was. I swear to God it was. You didn't see anything more because that's all there ever was. I admit . . . I lost my head, for a minute, and pretended to be fatherly and all that, and tell her to be careful of her cold. But that's all, Arlie, that's absolutely all."

"But 'all' is too much. I'm through, and that's all, too."

"You're not through. Look here. I know men, and I know you, and I know myself, and I'll take my oath, Arlie, that that's the worst you can expect from me. Honest, that's the worst. I admit I still like a pretty ankle, or a good eye. That's what got me with you, your eyes and your ankles. First, I mean. I couldn't love you so much if I couldn't *see* a pretty ankle. It ain't no little love I'm giving you. It's all I got, Arlie, all I got. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see perfectly, all you got—left."

"Listen, suppose . . . suppose you were carrying a glassful of water—full up and swelling over the edge. Suppose you could carry it without slopping a little over, now and then? Well, I'm full up—and all love for you, carrying it to you always. Only a little slopped over, that's all. . . . No, listen to me, Arlie. Don't go . . . Arlie!"

In a daze she undressed. He came after a few minutes to sit on the edge of the bed, staring fixedly, inanely at the floor. "I know I been a fool," he said finally, and then talked on while Arlie, with her back to him, longed to turn over and draw him down to a kiss of forgiveness; and yet she was too hurt, too mindful of Seraphine and what Seraphine would be thinking of her, and too intent also on the suspense of tasting Ed's bewilderment, repentance, pain to do as her impulse was insisting. At a mention of Seraphine's name she writhed with chagrin and tortured pride; and quickly reached back to taste her husband's pain again. "You'd better come to bed," she dully told him. "It'll do you no good to talk."

He undressed and lay beside her, silent for hours. The night muttered distantly. Separately they endured until morning.

They dressed in silence, she prepared breakfast with—
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out a word, and, though she saw that he wanted to talk, let him go in silence. Then as she worked she raged, needing deeply the reconciliation they had missed.

She was free, she reflected as she went to work, to make the most of the pale young lawyer; yet when he stopped for a moment that evening, having come after the first rush, she only said to him: "Would you mind telling my husband when you go in that I want to see him a minute?"

"Oh . . . yes. . . . Which is your husband, the man at the door?"

She nodded. It had been as she suspected; he had thought her unmarried; she had undeceived him, and he would stop no more. Nor did he.

When Ed put his head in at the back of the booth she turned to him with a smile and touched his hand; the sheathed look left his face.

"I just wanted to tell you, Ed," she whispered, "that I love you."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

His hand went to the switch on the wall, darkness flooded the booth and lobby. She was drawn by strong arms from her stool, was held, kissed, and restored to her upright position. The light leapt back. Ed had gone.

7

She waited for him that night; and leaving the employees to close the Isis, he led her away early. "Let's get something hot to eat," he said. "I'm hungry."

While they waited for their chocolate he criticized the operator. "Three times this week he's showed them the white screen. He can't understand at all why he shouldn't. Just laughs when I tell him we got to keep

up the allusion. ‘Nothing on earth destroys the allusion like a white screen,’ I tell him. About once more, though, and he goes. Wouldn’t you say so?’

“I suppose. I hate to see any one fired, though.”

“Sure, I hate to fire any one, too. But that boy! Why, he’s not even an operator. He’s just a cranker. ‘Ain’t you got no more pride,’ I said to him, ‘than to call yourself an “operator”? What I got to have is a Projectionist—some one with a profession, not just a damn’ trade. The Isis’ll help you,’ I said. ‘Send for a projection book tonight. And get a lens chart. Now take that shutter, for instance: it cuts out too much light. We got to get more illumination on the screen. Write to that man Dickinson on the *Motion Picture Universe* and tell him your troubles. I give you a month,’ I said, ‘and if you ain’t making them pictures damn’ near talk by then, why you’ll be talking to the streets,’ I said. ‘Any wop can be an operator, but it takes a gentleman and a scientist and an artist to be a projectionist. You play with light and shadows,’ I said. ‘You work your machine, but you gotta love your machine too, so you can make all Iowa drink dreams and come back crying for more.’”

“He just looked at me like a dying fish. I’m a fool to give him even a month. Why, ten Chinese centuries wouldn’t bring that guy up to be even an operator. Not to speak of a projectionist. Hell!”

The chocolate and crackers came.

. . . “And I think maybe by next fall we can put a real stage in and run some vaudeville acts and maybe a little comedy now and then. Say!” Stirring the chocolate he looked at her to see if she were going to catch. There was a pressure of words forming behind his smiling lips.

“But we fill the house now, without it.”

His eyes shifted. “Sure, but we could charge more, see? And I don’t know any reason the opera house

should have any monopoly on that stuff. Do 'em good to have a little competition."

"Well, yes, if we come out all right on it."

"We'll come out all right. Look what we're doing now! Say, if only I could buck Bunchie Mudge and close up his damn' opera house. Maybe I can beat him down, anyway, so he'll have to give it up. The boys are beginning to get wise that some one's come to town!"

Going home she thought again of what Seraphine would be thinking. She had downed everything but that. It was not until Ed grasped her arm more tightly that she knew she had drawn away from him. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing . . . I don't know." She looked up to the cold brilliance of the stars, riding in a depth of absolute blue cold. Below, about her, winds bleak with thaw were blowing up harsh streets on people who could never be at peace among their inconsequential furies, their minute despairs. As they ascended the stairs she shivered again, and raced on ahead.

CHAPTER XXII

THE NEW ISIS

I

THE redecoration of the Isis, the building of a small stage, the installation of new seats and boxes, the partitioning of a "ladies' rest room," and other matters of remodelling were accomplished during the summer of 1916, and Ed began to book vaudeville acts for the fall and winter. All the money the Isis had made, all they had saved, was put into this remodelling; the rest Ed found he could borrow. True, little had been saved: lavish advertising, plate glass mirrors for the miniature foyer, special carpets for the aisles, drinking fountains, ticket machines, lobby frames, new projectors—a hundred and one articles—had already consumed the profits. But now much of this was to be scrapped and new equipment ordered.

As a consequence they were more dependent than ever on the monthly check from the Shumans. Use had long ago made this acceptable to Arlie, and repaying the Shumans was a dream that followed Ed's "chain of movie palaces." At first she had cashed the check through the Isis, but now she opened an account with a small bank across the town, giving her name as Arlie G. Shuman. She had hesitated at doing this, but decided it was better to have the local bank clerks suspicious, if they should ever know her, than to have the Shumans suspect the

constant endorsement of the Isis. The check was too necessary to be lost.

But changing her account simply reshaped her fears. She imagined the cashier of the bank writing to inform Mr. Shuman that Arlie G. Shuman was really Mrs. Edward Somers, wife of the proprietor of the Isis. She saw Mr. Shuman receiving the letter. She read a hundred times his curt note to her, often demanding the return of all the money given her since her marriage to Ed. Perhaps, though, they would just stop sending the checks; she hoped that would be the way. But instead of walking over to deposit the check she mailed it.

Often her worries would give place to brief filming pictures of her life with Herb and his family. Marriage with Ed had passed beyond the sense of service, of obligation fulfilled, to a kindling of renewed desire; and had sunk to indifference, to listless functioning. Her fatigues were no longer innerved but enervated: hours of the day were not toned with memory or dimmed anticipation. The maturity of her relation with Ed had passed; her life hung, loosely irritating, beyond. Her marriage with Herb had been too green, she felt, too youthful. Herb had been changing, and because of that he had never been real; intimacy had never been final. Through wordless images of contrast she worked toward this, though once as she swept the rooms she grasped the broom tightly and cried out, "O Herb, I never knew you even!"

She did know Ed, though her perceptions blurred and he became a misted figure walking in brown rooms over an empty store—life perched upon nothing. But that was her own life. Reality was the jumps, the false starts, the jet of memory in the middle distance: Mrs. Shuman's face at the dinner table; Mrs. Gardewine in the kitchen; and Mrs. Shuman and Gloria again exchang-

ing looks of common appraisal, whose significance she caught only now, after years, as she swept the rooms.

Again and again she recalled her "breaks," and her walk to Bright Valley in midwinter. All such things gave the Shumans a bitter power over her. She twisted, trying to wrench herself physically away from the invulnerably persistent gleamings of those days. The harder she worked the more fiery and dizzy memory became. "Herb liked me, anyway," she would tell herself, and press the year at Finley for comfort—only to find its yield meagre and evanescent, and not at all of the luminous irritant fibre of Bright Valley, shreds and colored teasing filaments of whose tapestry glowed separately, and dissolved and reiterated themselves in crazed disharmony.

Despairingly she would try to put all this out of sight, out of mind, and then would fall back before its re-advance as exhausted as if she had been tugging at ponderous weights. In one effort at release she tried to imagine the redecorated walls of the Isis, but the Isis persisted as its old self, however many designs she threw upon its surfaces.

She sought relief in Gerald. Anticipating this vacation she had expected to take him to the city park, to play with him at home, and to tell him stories as she worked, or to sit with him by the window and weave stories out of the sunsets framed by the balcony posts. In the intervals of ticket selling she had often begun those stories, thinking of the time when the sunset itself, which she had seen seldom in Grand Forks, would help her to complete what too often faded into the routine of her work. But Gerald much preferred the fenced and vacant lot next to the building, or the maverick patch of trees and grass behind. When he came in, too, he invariably sought Mrs. Gelke first, and was brought home to meals only with difficulty.

Was she going to lose all hold of him? It was disturbing. . . . And the more Ed talked about "the New Isis" the more unreal the structure became. Not even the coming of the new seats, "the most comfortable in the state," stirred any desire in her to see the triumphant result. Ed had rushed home to tell her of their arrival. "They're bringing the last load of 'em now," he panted, urging her to come. "No," she answered, "I'm to wait. You wanted it yourself. It wouldn't do. You just trot along and have a good time, dear." In his enthusiasm Ed had forgotten their agreement: that she was not to go near the Isis until it had been completed and the last light installed. Thus she was to get the full effect at once and give Ed an unbiased criticism. "No one else will," he had said. "I'll get nothing but bouquets and lemons from them. What I want is the truth."

When he had gone she recalled her work in the lonely Bijou, the scratched seats and long benches in front, the endless dusting, which still had been a refuge. . . . Herb came in and went out, came in and went, sat talking to her while she dusted. She shook herself to brush away this illusion and was grateful for a mere tasteless blank of mind, which she drank as something refreshingly cool as spring water.

Slow steps outside the door, the door opened, and she looked into Herb's face, saw his thin lips begin to smile, saw the subtle curve of his forehead . . . but it was all so small, and distortedly near the floor. Her own eyes glimmered up at her.

"I wanna piece of brenbullen," it said.

"Oh, Gerald . . . you." She sat down. "Come here. My, but your dress is dirty! What have you been doing?"

"Wan' brenbullen."

She caught him to her, hugging his young solidity until he leaned back roaring with laughter. Through

tears she joined him. "You laugh like a cry," he told her, clinging to her leg while she spread his bread and butter.

"I know it, darling. I can't help it. But O Gerald!" and she shook him by the shoulders—"I love you, my baby, I love you! You're all I got, you're all I got! And you'll stay with me, won't you?"

"Um-hmm," he promised, with a full mouth.

"And you'll stay with me now, too, won't you?"

"Um-hmm, but,"—he swallowed fast—"go see Gelke first." He went off, dropping crumbs as he went.

2

In the morning she lay watching Ed, who slept heavily. Soon he would wake, eager as Gerald for his playthings. . . . Her gaze wavered . . . whiff of dream. . . . He was looking at her with sleep-cleared eyes, about which played the old lights she had loved him for. "What you thinking of?" he asked. "That funny look you get in your eyes, I don't get it sometimes."

She laughed. "I haven't any funny look in my eyes. Think about your own. You're still dreaming."

While shaving he announced, "Isis ought to be finished by next week."

"Yes?" She was not interested, and her last word to him was a snapping command to be home in time for lunch.

Why was it he had become so childish to her, and why must she be thinking all the time of Herb and his family, when at first she had revelled in having left all that behind for the comfort of commonness, loose clothes, and hair and nails—Gloria be damned—as she wanted them. At Bright Valley she had been forced into a life she had not known. People's thoughts were important in that life. She had left Bright Valley because of what Gloria

and Mrs. Shuman thought. At home in Coon Falls what you thought and what you saw were far less important than what you had to do, and had to do with. Again she was living such a life, it seemed, feeling at home in it, and was no longer afraid and insecure, as at Bright Valley.

Besides, a time was coming. . . . She and Ed would have money of their own, and then what they saw and thought might be important again, and shape lives. Lives might so become beautiful, in themselves. The trouble with the Shumans was the tightness of their lives; the thoughts of others had shaped them, not their own. Even their books had bound them. All they had was somewhere to stand, a place to start. Once, on a ride with Herb, when the feeders had charged up the corn-walled roads, she had felt a sunlit fullness of well-being; and beyond that there had grown another brightness, changing and repatterning itself, for a moment only. . . . The books might have led on to that, but Mrs. Shuman had always read to keep up with the magazines, and now . . . there were only moving picture journals and no time. The gain was being free of both Bright Valley and Coon Falls. If it was a gain?

If she had staid in Coon Falls . . . she might have married Ray Jarvis and have been a grocery clerk's wife. But wouldn't she have become more intimate with Ed, and have come to care for him, even in Coon Falls? If it hadn't been for her money he would have gone back to the Bijou and Tritchler. In any way she might have lived he would have been inescapable . . . unless Herb had lived too . . . unless he hadn't been so jealous that he drove that rabbit, all because of nothing. She stopped.

Because of nothing?

Doors opened on frantic heat; she closed her eyes on its light.

"Yes, yes . . . because of nothing! Because of nothing? Herb had been jealous of Ed, and she had married Ed. Had she cared for him even then? and even in the Bijou days? She could remember only his eyes, his glistening hair, his hands, supple and alive.

Herb must have been right after all, and have seen beyond her protests to what was growing in her. Yet she could recall no single thought, she could not remember even having remembered him. Perhaps this was why Herb persisted, an unreal but unvanishing ghost. Surely, she had thought, other women who remarried have not been so haunted. She herself would never be troubled by Ed. If he died life would be hard, and lonely as the street at midnight; but if she nevertheless married again he would not break her dreams. He would stay dead.

3

"Just try one of them seats. Go on, sit down," Ed urged. "Comfortable, ain't they?"

Arlie looked around at the "New Isis," at the walls covered with golden designs involved about oval paintings of no depth, given largely to blue hills, perpendicular lakes, and trees of amorphous foliage.

"It's fine, Ed, it's fine. My, you can be proud!"

Ed sat down, too, and looked it all over again. "Yep, it's the niftiest thing in this part of Iowa, if I do say it. And these seats. Gosh, I'll be coming in myself to sit in 'em. Notice they don't squeak at all. Quiet as a cat. . . . What d'you think of those pictures, though? I didn't want 'em myself. It's like having 'em painted on the walls in a picture gallery. Strikes me the only place for a picture in a theatre is on the screen. Then you concentrate on it. But Schulz said people like to look at 'em in intermissions, and I let him go ahead. What *I* wanted was just that design. That's good, that

is. It keeps your eye busy if you want to, and you're no tireder after looking at it the thousandth time than you was the first. I wanted it all over; but I paid him for knowing his business, and I suppose he does. Wha'd'-you think?"

"Why, I think it's all right. I kinda like the pictures."

"Do you? Say, that's good. I'll admit I was worried. They're so damn' still, and this is a *moving* picture show. Now you get the motion all right in that conventional thing. It keeps up the idea of motion even in an intermission. It's all laid out in front of you, only frozen like. I was afraid you might think Shulz was wrong though. I hope I *ain't* right this time; but I don't know."

She must say something; he had stopped. He must not analyze more. At any moment he might break the spell of self-deception he was weaving and see the truth he was so close to, that the pictures were intolerably cheap. He must be protected, "It's all beautiful, Ed, just beautiful, and it's worth all it's cost."

"D'you think so? Say now, I'm glad." He got up. "No, you stay where you are. I'll go up and put a film through. I want you to pretend you're seeing a show—just come in, like. Take me just a minute."

The lightness of his step up the aisle told her she had succeeded again. Presently the pregnant cone of light shot out and figures moved across the sunlit screen. Obediently Arlie watched them, imagining in the seats a vague audience in which she was only one. With all the changes it was easy to detach herself from the past and see the Isis for the first time; and it was good, yet it was brightly shoddy.

Some one was in the foyer. She went back to look, for no one was supposed to enter until evening. Then the "grand reopening" was to occur "under the Auspices of the Federation of Women's Clubs." That had been

a master stroke, Ed thought, with the proceeds to go toward fitting out a ward in the new hospital, which was to be known—the only compensation Ed had asked—as the “Isis Ward.” In addition to the feature film he had provided a vaudeville act; the women had procured a singer and were selling the tickets at a dollar apiece. Already the house was sold out, and Arlie would have nothing to do that evening. “It’s a great idea,” Ed had confided to her. “I’ll give these high brows such a good time I’ll make fans out of ‘em all. I’m going to lead the orchestra myself. Believe me, we’ll play those pictures tonight like they ought to be played!”

She found three women in the foyer. Piled at their feet were various ferns and flowers. One of the women, with gray hair and gleaming eyeglasses, stepped forward. “We’ve come with the decorations. The chauffeur’s bringing some more in from the car.”

“Oh yes,” Arlie replied, “I’ll call Mr. Shuman. I’m Mrs. Shuman.”

“I’m Mrs. Hillier. Yes, I wish you would call—Mr. *Shuman*, did you say? I thought it was Somers. . . . But maybe you’re not the proprietor’s wife? I thought you were, probably.”

“I—I’ll call the proprietor. *He’s* Mr. Somers,” Arlie stammered, and fled up the stairs. “They’ve come, Ed . . . those women with the decorations. They want to see you. Go on down.”

“All right, just a minute. You go down and talk to them. I’ll wait till this reel’s out.”

“No . . . I can’t. . . .” She felt faint.

“Go on down,” he urged. “You ought to meet ‘em.” She sat silent, unable to move, to speak. “Come on, then,” he said. “Go down with me.” She could only gesture at him impatiently, and turn up to him a face colorless under the powerful white blaze of the single light in the operator’s cell.

Puzzled he went, and she heard his voice, low and ingratiating. Through the nearest slot she saw him going down the aisle carrying a plant in each arm, and a man with other plants following the women. The latter were glancing at the pictures and then at each other. On the stage they discussed the placing of the decorations in voices that were too high. Quietly Arlie slipped out of the Isis and went home. Perhaps they wouldn't think of her again, or speak to Ed of his wife. But why had she made so utterly foolish a break—not even to know her own name!

When she heard Ed coming up the stairs she lay down quickly. He was troubled: "Too damn' bad for you to be sick today!" Feigning a rapid recovery from her indigestion after the hot tea and toast he brought her she kept up a discussion of the coming evening. There was no further mention of her sickness.

4

He had insisted that she view the reopening from a seat in one of the boxes. She was there early. She didn't know which of the "high brows" would be sitting beside her, but she feverishly hoped they would be none of the women who had come that morning. The house filled gradually. The girl ushers in their new uniforms glided back and forth, flopping down seats. A constant procession filled the aisles. Then the boxes filled, but the women she dreaded meeting, she noted with relief, were on the other side. Those about her began commenting on the Isis. "Cheap, isn't it? Such pictures!" "I thought this man Somers was a fellow with taste and ideas," a man put in heavily. "He's an almighty good advertiser, anyway. Wish I had him writing copy for me."

Arlie winced and glowed under the remarks, and wove

them this way and that, trying for something truthful yet pleasing to report. So engaged she hardly heard the singer or the vaudeville act, which began with Aïda and ended with ragtime. She lost her way in the film which followed, and contented herself with watching Ed's activively silhouetted figure in the orchestra pit. His cornet crooned to one side of the orchestra, blared at the other, and in the fortissimo passages, at an upward foreshortened angle, trumpeted appeal to the galloping horsemen on the screen.

Some of the women crowded about Ed afterwards to thank him. "It's been such a help. We couldn't have done it but for you." But Ed responded with a face whose soberness Arlie could not understand. On the way home he was unaccountably taciturn, and instead of the hour's jubilation she had expected, she found only moody silence issuing from him, and at last the information that he was "dog-tired" and was going to "hit the hay."

Out of dreams she woke to a vague sense of the room, and then of something unusual in the room, hidden in darkness, a low stir. It was beside her, it was Ed. She bent over him. "Why Ed, you're crying! . . . What's the matter?" The sobbing stopped and he drew her to him till their lips touched in vital contact. Then he forced a chuckle.

"I'm laughing just as much, Arl. At myself, for caring so much. I—oh hell, I'm just disappointed. It seems like I can't stand it."

"But what? Tell me." (Was he in love? Even so, if some one had hurt him she would—and she could, now—she would help him, even in that.)

"At the Isis. I thought it was going to be so much, and the God damn' decorators jimmied the whole thing. It's them pictures. I knew they wasn't right, but I sup-

posed they knew more about their business than I did. Hell, they don't know shucks! Fools, that's all. Just plain damn' fools . . . and they got all my money."

"Don't feel that way, Ed. Why it's—it's *beautiful!* that's what it is. I heard lots of people say so." (Why couldn't she keep that false pitch out of her voice? How was it people spoke when they weren't lying? She'd have to listen carefully to her own voice sometime when she was telling the truth and trying to get it believed.)

He was quiet now.

"Who said so?" he asked presently.

"Why, I don't know who they were. People around."

"In the boxes?"

"That's where I was sitting."

"Some of them clubwomen, probably, talking for your benefit."

"They didn't know who I was from Adam. Besides, Ed, you're all wore out tonight. It's been an awful drain, today has. You wait to see what the papers say. It's just your nerves now. . . . Here, put your head on my arm and go to sleep." She curled her body close to him and stroked his head.

"I'm a sorta damn' fool myself, I guess, to care so much," he said after long minutes had lapsed, "but I was all wrought up, like you say. I guess I need a good sleep."

"I'm sure you do, dear."

When, after what seemed an hour, he had said no more and appeared to be asleep, she drew her arm from under him to ease its discomfort, whereupon he shifted to his side. Then he had not been asleep. . . . She shouldn't have withdrawn her arm.

Lying wakeful herself for a long hour, she figured out of the night gray patterns of life, into which she sought to weave her own, meaningfully. The silence

overflowed with distant murmurings, life climbed pale heights into the dark, scaling insuperable cliffs, and time beat on.

Where was she going, why was she staying, would nothing come of it all, and was death the only answer? whatever death was. She had used to think of it as only a featureless gray entrance to heaven or hell; but now, and she could not remember how she came to see it so, she no longer believed in heaven and hell as once she had. Dreams. Their own shadow and joy thrown across interminable chasms, projections on the farthest silver creen that fade as the light fades and go out.

In the heart of the night, in its dark heart, eternal muttering, you cried—because some walls had weird cheap pictures on them; and you were comforted with lies about what people said of them, and went to sleep—or didn't go to sleep, but lay thinking of it all and your own cheapness in a cheap world, where you couldn't find things out by staying awake or by going to sleep. Only it was easier to sleep.

5

In the morning she found Ed seated at the table, cutting from the *Grand Forks Gazette* a half-column account of the reopening of the Isis. "Listen," he said. "How's this? 'The Isis has been completely remodelled, boxes have been installed and the walls retinted in pleasing designs with mural paintings of rare artistic skill. The Schulz and McAlpin Decorating Company of Grand Forks had charge of the work.' And there's a little editorial about me, too: public spirited and all that sort of thing. Want to see it?" Without waiting for an answer he handed her the clipping.

"That's fine, Ed; that's fine. I told you to wait till morning."

"You told me? When? . . . Oh." A sheepish grin crossed his face. "I's a damn' fool last night. All wore out, I guess. . . . I'll just stick those in my file, huh? A man don't get an editorial written about him every day."

CHAPTER XXIII

SUBLIMATION

I

"WELL, old girl, we're going to light into 'em now. Got our week-ends booked up with the best kind of stuff. Say! . . . Want another pancake, Gerald? Throw me your plate then. . . . Hey, no! don't take me so seriously, you young devil. Pass it, *pass* it! . . . And the Kaufmans tonight with their song and dance, they'll go good. Always do. I knew Dinky in Sioux City. . . . What say we have 'em afterwards for one of those oyster stews you make? I'll have old Jensen send up a couple quarts of oysters and a quart of cream. Huh?"

"Oh—for four people? A pint's plenty."

"Yeh, I know—two oysters to a bowl. No sir, we'll feed 'em right, stuff 'em till they're gooey and have a lot left. Makes a man feel fuller if there's some left he can't eat."

"But, Ed, not a quart of oysters, for a stew for four people!"

"Sure. . . . Then I'll ask Mat and some girl. He's in town, saw him last night."

"All right then. We'll have quite a little party. We've never had any one in except Mat once, for that Sunday dinner."

Ed had always liked Mat—Virgil Matson—a travelling salesman he had known in Sioux City. He was the

one man with whom Ed was really intimate; acquaintances were many, and though he held to the American business man's belief in "joining," he was not himself a "joiner." Frequently he had admired men who belonged to four or five lodges, but his own life was sufficient; he belonged to that too avidly, too naïvely, to be directly interested elsewhere. Such sustenance as he required he distilled in a Sunday from Virgil Matson's stories, and that essence of association would carry him until Mat came to Grand Forks again.

"What girl we get for him?" Ed asked.

Girl? Seraphine was a girl, a girl with dark hair and eyes that were bright in her rosy face. . . . That face hung before her, a laughing, bodiless image; then beside it was a pallid face of long chin and heavy eyeglasses, the lawyer. The glances they had given each other . . . she had never told Ed; there was nothing to tell. Yet she could make it right now by showing again her forgiveness, and so sealing it. Something outreach-ing, which would gather all the little services into one. For weeks, she felt, through the late fall and early winter, she had wanted to do just such a thing, little yet heavy with meaning. It was coming now—she was lighter in movement and thought. A vague distillation of spring, even in February, was running in her blood; and that had been making them friends, more than husband and wife. With the gradual pallor of the dawn it had been coming; and so she had sensed it—no more, but had strained toward it as toward the arrival of a spring beyond sex, yet one filled with its luminous delight.

She and Ed might find a little time for play. There must be more than work for which they lived together, and more than their escapes into unlit intensities, which she did not name but imaged. Play—in which they would be free of themselves as man and woman. Sera-

phine would be the sign of their release. "Why not ask Seraphine?" she queried. "She's pleasant."

His direct gaze at her broke, but was instantly controlled and resumed, as quick as the flicker in the light current. "Oh, I don't know," he answered, looking away to spear another pancake with his fork, but endeavoring to look away as if he had earned the right, tacitly admitted, by the steadiness of his gaze; and endeavoring also to make everything as natural as if nothing but the pancakes were under discussion. "Do you think we'd better ask her? She's . . . I don't know . . . I think we could get some one better, don't you?"

"I don't know who. Mat would like her, I know he would. You get her."

"Well, but I won't ask her till late. Maybe we can think of some one else."

Arlie smiled. She was glad he was disturbed; that made it more satisfying. But she would have to let Seraphine know that she knew. That could be done, possibly, by a passing question about her cold—with a smile, of course.

Ed, having finished his breakfast, caught Gerald into his arms, swung him high, pretended to let him drop, caught him with a shout and set him down. Gerald's face was ecstatic and uplifted, pleading for more.

No—she caught the thought back, choked it—Ed was not exultant at having Seraphine come, but at having forgiveness proved.

"I'll toss you too, old girl," he said, hugging her to him, and kissing her laughing, flushed face. "Best old *young* girl in the world, that's what *I* say. Gosh, I'm glad I got you for a wife. You're so good to look at, Arlie, like a gray flower."

"What do you mean, Ed? . . . Maybe you saw that gray hair the other day."

"Naw, I didn't see no gray hair! Wouldn't matter if

I had, though. Gray ain't the word. . . . Silvery you are . . . in your eyes. Twilight around 'em always. Oh hell! I just love you, kid, and I'm going to make a hell of a lot of money for you—for us—and Gerald. Only I got to go now. I'll see Jensen and have him send up the oysters and cream. So long!" He kissed her and was gone.

Surely it was not merely because Seraphine was to come. . . . She pouted because again shadow had blown across the spring of sun and bright wind of her elation.

In the bedroom, after sending the curtain scuttering to the top of the window, she looked at herself in the mirror. Gray? Silver-gray? Silvery? But her eyes were blue. . . . She retwisted her hair and made it firmer with more hairpins. At last she returned to her work, singing. As she sang she remembered. Of late she had been released from the miserable reiteration of her life with the Shumans and Herb. Stray episodes of her childhood, bright and translucently shadowed, bubbled up through a fresh serenity and went out. It had been as if the current of her thought, dammed, were refilling the back valleys of her life, touching them with a cool weightless water. This morning it had ebbed to those months before she had married Herb. In her present serenity she did not regret that . . . not even the town of peering faces. If those heavy months had opened her to unnamed malignant presences, they had also let her find wordless meanings where she had never found them before, and much was good. Before her pregnancy she had wandered blind, and long fear and brief agony had opened her eyes. If she had waked to find the middle of the night shapeless and monstrous upon her, it was an endurance she paid, as on this morning, for finding the world electric, colored, and finely wrought to her mood.

She had Gerald, she had herself, she had Ed, who was more than a man. A man, man, man, man, man—the

word was only the beating of a gong, meaningless. Ed was more than that. She would pound all words until they were broken open to mere husks of sound . . . noises. "Love, love, love, love, love"—a lippy humming, bees and cool water. She and Ed were beyond love, forgetful and together; they had shaken away the clutter of life and of themselves in an ecstatic release from sex, a flying into silver light and a burst of inner heaven . . . silver gray.

She had known such moments—once before she went for that starlit, humiliating ride with Herb. Before she had gone there had been half an afternoon when even housework had been a perfect thing to do; and at a later hour, wandering in the garden, her heart had been voluptuously melancholy in a withdrawal from desire and love—even as she understood them then—in a pleasurable ache of pain that lurked again below her happiness.

. . . The hour in the garden had broken to bristly irritations, prelude to the ride. But this would not break, not yet; she would hold it too carefully, through the day and through the days and years. Even if she lost it—at least she had known these hours; far apart, yet she had known them.

Jensen's delivery boy came with two quarts of oysters, a quart of cream, and two of milk . . . pure waste, and when they were in debt. . . . But no, Ed was an old dear, an extravagant old dear, but he should have his way. She would give him an oyster stew that he would remember, even though he had, of course, forgotten the crackers.

2

She resolved, early in the day, to enjoy the Kaufmans' act, no matter how bad it was. It would make the evening easier afterwards. At first she did enjoy it,

Mrs. Kaufman (Dolores Bendixen on the programme) was so big and falsely coy and florid as she ogled the spotlight from under the rim of a pale blue hat. Kaufman darted around her like a barking terrier, his distorted derby vibrating on his head in tune to the staccato shuffle of his feet. The audience chuckled, Arlie with them. She would ask Kaufman later how he managed that derby; it would be something to talk about.

They advanced for a song, and Dolores, with enormous eyes and a screeching metallism in her voice, swung her arm with preoccupied violence during a fortissimo passage to strike Kaufman across the face. He hobbled to one side, weeping broken-heartedly; the song was shattered. Dolores, with arms akimbo, glared at him. The house grew silent, waiting. . . . Arlie felt a gasp of tears start in her. She laughed at herself . . . such a fool . . . even in a play you wouldn't cry at that. What could be wrong with her that she was affected by so apparent a prelude to another laugh? Dolores was close to him now, bending over his shoulder, inspecting him, and then grimacing at the audience. Kaufman's sobs redoubled, his whole body agitated itself. Dolores grasped his shoulder, shook him vigorously, yelled in his ear: "Shut up, you'll wake the baby! What are you crying about?"

"Because you hit me," he whimpered.

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"But—bu—but you didn't hit me hard enough."

A fuse of laughter started, crackled, went out; it wasn't the line.

"Didn't hit you hard enough? What do you mean?"

"Yu—yu—you never hit me hard enough."

A shorter fuse.

"I never hit you hard enough? Why, Fido, if I hit you any harder I'll kill you. Then I'd be a widow."

"That's it, I want you to be a widow. Oh—oh—oh—"

Elaborately avoiding her he boo-hooed across the stage, hiccoughing as he went, his derby bouncing at every hic-cough: "I want you to be a widow."

The fuse crackled this time into a crescendo of cach-innations and guffaws that subsided only to be rekindled by a girl's treble giggle. Kaufman and Dolores zig-zagged to the whitened central brilliance of the stage and began their song, *I Want You to Be a Widow*, in which the alternate burdens of "He wants me to be a widow" and "I want her to be a widow" finally played themselves out, Dolores wept herself off the stage, and Kaufman pattered into a clog dance.

When she returned it was with a shoe very much unlaced, the strings dangling as she minced along. Ceremoniously Kaufman began the tying, making difficulties that gave him gradual excuses to hitch her skirt to the knee. The great calf, distended on his forearm, glistened under the spotlight in a radiance of silk so white that it seemed to break into fiery particles of color. Kaufman patted the calf, swung its inert length from the supported knee, and dropping to the floor, leaving the women statuesquely still, adored the calf's rotund, silken immobility. Then he drew up his trouser leg until his sock and brilliant red garter were exposed, and assumed the same pose as his wife, and also her simper. After a plaintive interval he pleaded with the audience: "I'm here, too, you know."

Arlie lost the sound of her own laughter in what followed. "Aw, hell!" Ed was murmuring at her side, having just sat down in the only vacant seat left. "Dinky ought to know better'n that. Old as the hills, that gag is. Funny though, how it gets 'em. Every time."

"I never heard it before. Is it old, Ed?"

"Hell!"

She had laughed too much; she felt weak, namelessly

depressed, and joined but faintly in the tumultuous applause at the curtain. "Good of you to fix it so I could come in," she told Ed in the foyer. "Guess I'll go home now and slick things up a bit. Did you get Mat all right?"

"Sure, we'll all be up, after the next show." He hurried away and she pushed into the outgoing crowd, feeling foreign in its pressure. As she walked home the light of the stars seemed raw, and their brilliance big and lustrous, as if they too were thawing with the winter. The breeze stirring along the street chilled her, sheathed her in chill. A homeless chill, that no fire or warmth could scale away. She wished, on the gray outside stairs, that she had only to go to bed. Why, on this particular night, should she have to put the last things in order and make an oyster stew? Its ingredients confused themselves with others: she saw a spilling of sugar on oysters and thick cream, heard the running of sugar on the paper of the sack. . . . Ugh! why that? It would be bad enough anyway. The door slammed itself against the wall as if her own hand had been assisted by another and stronger one.

"I hate the Kaufmans!" she cried. "I hate the Kaufmans!" Fat calf and thin calf, cow eye and pig eye, yellow-haired old fool and dirty, yapping dog of a man. . . . How could Ed ever have stood them, or have bought two quarts of oysters for them? Any day the allowance might stop. Their whole act was disgusting. . . . What if you did laugh, you cried too. Only the clog dance had been good. You wanted it to keep on and on—a gay, interminable pattern of sound that fitted something in you with such flat accuracy. The glistening distortion of that calf! She became conscious of her own calves, hanging like nervous weights. To scream, to kick—how could she get rid of the sensation? In the darkness of the kitchenette she fumbled for the light.

"Have another, Mat, and you, Dinky." Ed was pouring beer from the bottle, and as it foamed over the brim of the glass Arlie felt symptoms of nausea rising in her. The stew had long ago been eaten, and a big bowl thick with oysters was left. Then Ed had produced the beer. The fourth bottle was being emptied now. One glass had been enough for Arlie, though before she had liked beer. "Especially not with an oyster stew," she had objected faintly, but Ed had responded, "Who in hell cares? This is my party." With an "Oh" she had retired to the chair where she still sat, watching Mat lift a glass to Mrs. Kaufman's mouth. Feebly Mrs. Kaufman pushed it away, and then succumbed, reclining against his arm.

Mat had the air of one who was amusing some one else while only partially amused himself. His high forehead above his dark blue eyes seemed higher than ever; surely there was less of the short black hair that had once been curly. Tonight his face did not seem so unfinished and questioning. Its rectangularity, its regularity, were possessed with half a purpose. Bending closer he murmured in Mrs. Kaufman's ear, continuously, as if he were explaining something very confidential and very important over a telephone. Mr. Kaufman, with his back to this and facing Arlie, was pouring some whiskey from a flask Mat had set on the table much earlier; and was trying at the same time to blow away the sinuosity of gray smoke that coiled its slow banners through the room.

"I can't mix my drinks, Mrs. Somers, like your husband. I can't mix my drinks. Like 'em clear, like—like eyes, you know . . . blue eyes."

"Your wife's?" Arlie inquired indifferently. They were her first words for minutes.

"No, not *my* wife's, like Ed's wife's . . . wife . . . Ed wife's . . . Ed's wife's 's . . . you know." He

drank. His face had been meek and pleasant, not dirty at all. She wanted to talk to him, and had taken her chair by another empty one in the hope he would follow her to it.

"Have a drink yourself, Mrs. Arlie? I—really, I'd like to have you drink. With me."

"No thanks."

"Help you to forget. Husbands get foolish sometimes . . . can't help it. *I* know. I'd like to be . . . often . . . often. . . ." He touched her withdrawing hand. "No? Well, you're right. Just because Ed's off, no reason for you, for us, but—"

"Sit up and be sensible." The words snapped out through a thick mist. She could almost see the words struggle through it, a thickening mist about her, not alone of smoke. She was light, and couldn't find herself. Sullenly she ceased trying. Ed's arm withdrew from about Seraphine. They were seated against the wall behind the table. Then his arm slipped back and Seraphine let her head sag upon Ed's shoulder. He tenderly enclosed the bright upward face with his arm, drew it closer, bent over. The tautness of her strained body protruded the slope of her breasts under the red waist. Arlie watched it with the same stiff lack of interest with which she watched Mat and Mrs. Kaufman. It was merely a growth of dream out of that mist; it would dissolve. She flung out her arms, driving away smoke and mist and clearing the air for a moment. "Open the window behind you, Kaufman," she directed. "There, it'll do you good. Listen, I want to talk to you. I want you to tell me something. Are you steady now?"

"As ice."

"Something about tonight. You know when your wife slapped you? On the stage, I mean, and you blubbered at one side. Now tell me why it was I didn't feel like laughing for a minute. No, I didn't cry too. I knew it

was just to get a hand, but tell me why I'd have just the tiniest beginning of a cry in me. . . . I'd like to know that."

He smiled at her, and seemed himself now. Had he been playing drunk to cover his attentions, if that became necessary? She examined the possibility dispassionately.

"Maybe," he began, "it was because I felt mad, and a little like crying. She hurt me, see?"

"Oh come. I'm not so innocent as all that."

"But it's a fact. Absolutely. You see, I'd crabbed a line from her earlier. Got the laugh. She never can put some things across, and I can. I wanted things to go right in Ed's house, so I started off and shoved her into it, see? and she had to play tag. So she biffed me right. I had to take it later, too."

"But isn't that in your act?"

"Sure it is, but not the big whack. Damn' near broke my nose. It's been sore ever since." He touched his face tenderly.

"Yes, but that wouldn't account for the way I was feeling."

"Maybe not. . . . I'm going to close this here window. Chilly."

Seraphine's eyes, dark and gleaming open, stared wildly at the ceiling. She was struggling to be free and Ed was struggling to retain her.

The mist of indifference was vanishing; only smoke was left. She must bring back the mist. "Pour me a drink, Kaufman." She drank, choked, spread the whiskey slowly through her mouth, let it trickle down. "Give me another." She sank back. An eery glow began to penetrate her. She was lulled, vibrating. She sprang up.

"Start the phonograph, Kaufy. Ed borrowed it on purpose. I know you can dance. Teach me the new

ones. I don't know 'em. Come on, you muts!" She shoved the table back. Ed and Seraphine tottered. She pushed harder, but Ed rescued their chairs and staggering they let themselves be pushed farther. Then Arlie threw herself in Kaufman's arms. Mat was watching her with quizzical superiority, almost contempt. She flattened her breasts against Kaufman and somehow was dancing, back and forth, whirled quickly but agilely following. A beating glow of music blared and dimmed and blared again through the room, through her. Kaufman had both arms around her, was clutching her tightly to him. Oh, she didn't care! She would make him wild. . . . Whirl, back again. She was lifted. . . .

Mat and Mrs. Kaufman were dancing now. She looked through a crackled glaze of color for Ed, making him out still behind the table, Seraphine's head in his lap and his hands on her breasts.

"Watch where you're going," Mrs. Kaufman was shouting. Had they bumped each other? The light of the room dimmed. Kaufman had danced her into the darkness of the bedroom, and out. He started for it again, but she brought them up against the jamb; her head knocked cruelly against it. She fell away from him into a chair. "Come on," he was saying through the swirl. She struck out at him. Fool, words hurt, like her head, yet she was speaking: "Open the window; leave it open." Shivering in the cold air she took the glass from the detached hand remaining steadily in front of her and drank. A memory of the first inner glow stirred. There came a beery belch. She was dizzy as she tried for the door.

"I'll help you in."

"You won't. Go back. I—go back." She struck at him again.

She fell across the bed full length. She wanted to burrow into it and be covered as with hills, to have pres-

sure, pressure, to compress her to herself. Her leg had swollen to enormous porous size, a continent in itself, which she could yet move, across the silence and across it.

4

Most of the smoke had vanished, leaving only its staleness behind. The window was closed. Kaufman was stretched out on the cot, an empty glass on the floor by his languidly dropped hand. Mat and Mrs. Kaufman had their backs to her. Seraphine, in Ed's lap, she could barely see. Was Seraphine crying? Ed, after staring at her in stony unrecognition, returned the angle of his face to Seraphine's.

She did not know how long she had been absent. It seemed hours; perhaps it was half an hour. At any rate she was clear-headed now, and could order even the gray confusion of the room with its clots of persons. What she focussed on was Mrs. Kaufman's calf, extending beyond her skirt, fat, round, black, and tapering to the ankle against which Mat's toe rested.

For the length of a moment's stupidity she gazed at that junction, and then returned to the bedroom window to look out on the desolate street. There were dark gleams where the pools of the thaw had frozen; softly she became aware of the telephone poles, rising in thin, black immaculateness down the street. They went on and on, along country roads, past sleeping farm buildings, to other towns and on again. But they kept going, circling around, darting off, in interminable lines. Desperately she shook them off, detached herself, to find them narrowing upon her and pulling her along, an infinite chitter-chatter of poles . . . poles. They were gone. But confusion lay about her, dust of confusion. A waver of music—the music of her morning—sounded flute-like to some inner sense; then came the realization that it

had all gone, and that no comfort was possible, at the end of her day, in the knowledge she had lived such a morning, such a long and silver hour. Having had it didn't matter.

She groped again for the bed and lay there in anguish. Out of the upper night developed a hover of menace, cold and of no color.

"Oh, my God, my God! Is that all you are? Is that *all*?" Then she arose, slowly, as if she had found, in her groping, what she sought.

5

Mat stood in the doorway, then crossed quickly, with the noiseless agility of a cat, to the bed. "What you drop?" he asked, but heard no answer.

"What did you drop?"

There was a movement on the bed, and a groan followed.

"What's the matter? Tell me."

The movement ceased; there came a paroxysmal inward withdrawal of breath, gathering at its close to a tone. As he went forward his foot kicked something light that bounded, dull glass, against the baseboard, and rocking fell silent. He reached for it, waving his hand over the floor. "Ed!" he called into the silence of the other room. "Where's the light, the light?" His arms fought the air in desperate futility, then brilliance flooded the room, and he turned to see Arlie on the bed, doubled up in pain, her hands on her stomach, her eyes pleading. He picked up the bottle and read.

"My God, girl! Tell me, quick, where the eggs?"

"Kitchen . . . cupboard," she gasped. He had already gone. Seconds of racket succeeded in the kitchen, and he was back, but he had to wait while she vomited.

"Take this," he said.

"No," she whispered, and shook her head.

"Take it," he commanded, and an eggy slime flowed down her throat. She lay back. "No you don't. You get up. You got to walk."

"I can't," faintly.

"You're going to get up, that's all."

She swung to her feet, grasped his arm. "You come with me," and he led her into the other room, rescued the flask and poured her a drink.

"I can't take more," she whispered.

"You have to. Drink it." She turned to him a white face, small and pleading, but finding his eyes, drank.

"Now come back."

"I can't walk more—lie down."

"Listen, how many of those did you take?"

"One, maybe. I don't know. . . . Spit most of it out."

"Oh." He was panting. "I guess you're all right then. I heard the bottle drop. I musta come right away. Soon as I knew I'd heard it I did. You—you had me scared, Arlie."

She put out her hand, he was trembling. "I feel better now. I couldn't of really got much down." She smiled at him wryly. "I guess I was more scared than anything."

"I'm glad I didn't act as if you was just scared. I'll get a doctor now. Where's the telephone?"

"Had it taken out. We don't use one here much."

"I'll tell Ed to go for him then. But no, wait a minute." He made a quick trip to the door and back. "I guess Ed's taken that girl home. I remember now when I come in here first they was coming to, sort of, and I heard a door close. It musta been them."

"They."

"They'? Yeh, sure."

She couldn't explain. She thought she had been cor-

recting herself before Mrs. Shuman. "But listen, Mat. Promise me you won't tell Ed. I was more scared than anything. *Thought* I was having pains, and wasn't. I don't want Ed to know."

"But he ought to know, after the way he flung the gay arm tonight. Do him good, driving you to this. My God!"

"It wasn't that. You don't understand."

"No? What then?"

"It's too hard to tell you. . . . Turn out the light. It hurts my eyes . . . there. . . . Do you think Ed will be back soon?"

"I hope so. But what's the matter, Arlie? What made you take that?"

"I don't know. I couldn't stand it. I was afraid, I guess."

"Of what?"

"I can't tell you now. I can't find it."

"Wasn't it Ed, and Seraphine?"

"No, not that. That doesn't hurt me, yet."

"What then?" Mat had drawn a chair to the bedside and was leaning shadowily near, like a doctor.

"I don't know that I can tell you, Mat," she said, putting out a hand which he touched and then held. "It's like when you turned the light out just then. Then things sorta stepped out of nothing and stood outside, big and awful—you don't know what they are, and . . . once in a while it's like that with me. It was tonight. The light went out, inside, and it was like God, without any brains, coming after me, just me alone. Don't ask me more, Mat. Just hold my hand, tighter."

They remained thus, with grasped hands, for a time that was huge and minute. They expanded toward each other and were merging continents; they were minute and separate; they were usual.

Then some one stirred in the other room and Mat left her to see what it was. "It's Kaufman," he reported. "He's waking up. Laying there on the cot by his wife. She's dead to the world. I'll get 'em up and out." He vanished. Slow voices began, protests, words from Mat; but unable to impose any pattern of meaning on the pulpy murmur, she gave up trying.

A tall, vague form stood beside her. Ed was speaking. "Mat . . . said you'd been sick. Better get dressed, undressed, Arl. In bed. I'll clean up. Needs it."

"Take off my shoes." She lifted the comforter that had been thrown over her and Ed began to fumble at her shoes, then snapped on the bulb. She met its pain of light with a cry.

After a time she was going to sleep again, with Ed beside her, breathing heavily and regularly.

Mrs. Gelke brought Gerald in during the next morning. Trouble was on his face. "Kiss me, Gerald," Arlie said to him. He hesitated before giving her a long wet kiss and stood looking at her soberly.

He was getting big, he was no longer a baby. She hadn't realized: he would be four in May.

"I'll get you something to eat, Mrs. Somers. What would you like? Your husband ain't in no condition to do much."

"Oh, you needn't trouble. I'll be all right."

"I will too trouble. You can't talk that way to me." Mrs. Gelke drew Gerald back to her and put an arm around him, looking at Arlie critically. Her face was long and dark, horsey, with intense brown eyes.

Arlie gave in. "Well, a little toast, maybe."

"I'll get it, right away. Come on, Gerald, you stay with Gelke today." Gerald followed obediently, even eagerly, without another glance at his mother. She was losing him, she felt, just like that. Better to send him back to the Shumans than to go on this way. She hardly saw him, and "Gelke" was the center of his world, about whom and in whose rooms he revolved. Gelke, too, like Mrs. Shuman, had spoken once of adopting him. Had she no right to her own flesh, that even now looked away from her to others for his pleasures and his care?

The valiance of yesterday's morning had faded so rapidly that she might never find it again. Its beauty had been that of release from the clutter of living, the clutter of being a woman, but the brutal hours had let it round toward release from life itself; and there the half-heartedness of her attempt had brought confusion. At each pole she had failed.

All day Ed came in and went out, but not until evening did he sit down beside her, his fingers working at the fringe of the clean bedspread. Each moment she thought he was about to speak and discharge in confession the trouble gathered on his face, but he said nothing. Perhaps he did not know how much she had drunk, and hence how little she had seen; or perhaps he could not force from his throat the insuperable words. Yet it was plain that his conscience was at work. She would have pitied him for it if she had been able to pity anything, but to pity would be to rise above the lethargic indifference which had possessed her, and which made him an object only a shade more interesting than the other objects in the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

WITHOUT STINT OR LIMIT

I

AFTER her days in bed she was very familiar with the ceiling; and ordinary life, resumed, was only an extension of that flat, discolored expanse. But with the declaration of war in April she found remote disturbances enlarging to include even her within themselves. Alien and tremendous affairs, issues of peril and coruscant light, were about to be near. At times she rose to a new life; and then was old.

She sat one morning watching Ed polish her shoes. "You needn't do that," she said, her eyes on the angular jerk of his arm. "I can do 'em myself or drop in at Gus's. It don't cost much."

"Well, it costs some, and we need money for the Liberty Loans."

"Yes?" A dull yes, with only a weak rise of interrogation. All life had moved behind bleared glass and in dull water. To speak, especially to Ed, was a feeble tossing of bits of paper against the impenetrability of the walling glass. All movement was weighted, as if the medium in which she lived had invisibly thickened. She seemed never to think. Instead, dull strains, twisting into knots, coiling painfully, never accomplishing. Yet she was about to find something muggily achieved: this was not the first time Ed had polished her shoes. Twice

she had found the dishes washed ; often he had helped her with them ; and he had relieved her also of some of her work at the Isis, sending her out into the street and to the confused loneliness of the rooms.

Ed performed these services as once she had performed them for him ; he had been doing them since the morning after the party ; weeks ago. She saw it only now. Was it because of Seraphine, who had been "fired"? That had been unjust ; Seraphine had been as good at the new organ as at the piano. But exactly what he was expiating she did not care. Seraphines might come and go, and Ed take all of them home.

She looked about at the disorder of the room. "Gerald, you go out and look for the paper. Maybe it fell off the steps."

"Nope," Ed offered, "it didn't come. I looked all over for it. I knew you'd want it."

"Why didn't you buy one then?" she asked irritably. "That's about the third time this month we've missed that paper."

"Oh no it ain't, Arlie. It's been late sometimes, but we ain't really been missed."

"We have too! Don't tell me, I'm the one that reads it. When do you look at it? Any one would think we weren't *at* war, to judge by you."

"You know, Arlie, I do everything I can."

"Except go."

"But when I wanted to go you wouldn't let me. How can I, and leave you and Gerald?"

"Gerald would be all right. Better'n the rest of us, at the Shumans. And I guess I could look out for myself."

"All right, then, by God! I'll go!" He tossed the brush aside.

Arlie sat sullen by the window. "You won't!" she snarled.

"Well, for the love of God, what ails you? First you tell me to go and then to stay. Maybe you think I wouldn't like to go, with you this way all the time. I never know where to find you any more. Honest to God I don't. Why, I try, kid, honest, I do—try to make things just as pleasant as I can. It seems too damn' hard at times. What's the—" His voice trailed out. He didn't want to ask again what was the matter, Arlie thought, because of a fear that she would present him with what he was trying to cover, under the lapse of time, with these small persistent tasks—the matter of Seraphine, which she had never mentioned. But how far he was from understanding when even she could not understand.

All she knew at present was her deep need of the morning *Gazette*. She would feel better when she had used it. If only she could let Ed know how little Seraphine mattered, let him know without referring to her. She sank into hopeless immersion, floating lax in utter indifference, then felt indignation beginning to bristle. She would strike out again if he did not speak.

He did; and seemed to have followed a dark parallel of her own thoughts: "I'll go and get a paper for you now, while you get breakfast. Come on, Gerald; want to go with Ed?"

"Don't take that child with you. You'll forget he's along and let him be run over." Her face crimsoned at the excuse she had found for her indignation.

"Rats!" He smiled at her. "Come on, boy." Gerald went, and Arlie felt better. She always did when momentarily Ed took command. His weakness fed itself.

Breakfast she had ready when they returned, and as the others ate, Arlie read until her coffee was lukewarm and her egg clammy. She gulped them down. The paper itself had been a vivid emotional meal, without which she felt starved and flaringly irritable.

That loyalty which in other years had made her unconsciously pro-German, coming blindly to life, had identified itself with the power quickening through the country.

2

Little by little as the months passed she wrought for herself from the war a region of escape. Unknown to Ed she gave the newsboy passes to the Isis for bringing the paper up the steps and slipping it under the door; he never missed them now.

Her mother wrote that Phil had gone in the first draft, and Arlie hung up a service flag and wore a pin with a blue star. Time did not permit work in the Red Cross rooms, but she knitted constantly, neglecting housework and keeping people waiting until she could knit to the middle of the needle. Always she left the tickets to hear the four-minute speeches, and Ed complained to her of the fifteen minutes one orotund gentleman absorbed, she flew at him in a small frenzy, calling him "pro-German, Hun, dirty yellow dog." To affirm his loyalty he announced that he was going, even if he was beyond draft age, if the board would let him; whereupon she sulked until the tears came and pleaded with him into the night. He did not go.

When she heard that the young lawyer had gone she found herself thinking of a pin with two blue stars. She snatched back the thought, though not soon enough. First she smiled at herself and then, breaking one teacup, threw another after it in her rage.

A diffused sense of personal sacrifice sometimes helped her with her work. Before the war had made her part of its hysterical boiling rise she had clearly seen that her work at the Isis did little more than purchase for Ed an indulgence in such playthings as the "Isis Screen," the lack of which did not prevent the other moving picture

theatres in Grand Forks from being more prosperous than the Isis. But now it was not only hard to get help, it was a struggle to meet the payments on the Liberty Loans; the quota assigned them by the Loyalty League having been based apparently on Ed's advertising space rather than on his resources. At first Ed had wanted to protest, but Arlie had violently objected. "We'll do what they tell us. Think this war's going to be won by protests? Besides, it'll be bad for the Isis." The result was that for the first time it was necessary for her to work, just when she was wanting, more than ever before, a bungalow again, with a roomy yard for Gerald. She wondered whether many women who appeared to be serving so assiduously were really sacrificing as much as she told herself she was.

At intervals of a month or more Mat would drop in, looking up Ed first and then coming to her.

When he came peace gathered around her; somewhere music was playing, though she could hear it but faintly. Then only did she drop her knitting. When he had gone she was soothed, and turned over in her mind the "inside" information on the conduct of the war. Apparently he heard much of it.

Once he came to the rooms when she was alone.

After their first words there was a silence for a time. "You haven't tried any more foolishness, have you?" he asked finally.

"No," she smiled, "that's all gone, Mat. I'm myself now, all the time. And I'm happy as—well—as I suppose you ever get."

"I don't believe you," he announced curtly.

She looked up at him, at his wrinkling forehead, his prosperous form, and at the blue of his eyes, in which lurked knowledge of an uncomprehended defeat. "But I am," she protested; she recalled her knitting, Gerald—

whom she knew better now—and the morning *Gazette*, the evening *Tribune*. “I am, Mat, happy as you’re likely to ever get.”

His head dropped and he regarded the floor stupidly. In a short time he left, and Arlie felt it had hurt him to say the few words of good-bye. What thoughts, what wants, what sick vacancies and spurts of anger congregated behind that troubled forehead, she wondered. Of what would he be thinking as he swung his sales? Some one should be caring for him, soothing him.

3

The restaurant was crowded the night she met Gloria and her husband. They had come up the aisle of tables rather conspicuously, just as she and Ed were finishing their dinner. Arlie had recognized Whittaker first, despite his officer’s uniform. His head, so large that it was almost a distortion, seemed handsomer under his officer’s cap. Gloria was at his side, shedding a rich immaculateness and a consciousness of being attended by an officer whom people were noticing. Arlie rose instinctively: “Why Gloria! I’m so glad to see you. And Mr. Whittaker.” They shook hands. “This—this is Mr. Somers.” Arlie fumbled the words. Ed shambled up and leaning across the table extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you, I’m sure.”

“Mr. Somers owns the Isis, where I work.”

“Oh yes,” Gloria’s brows lifted. “How do you do, Mr. Somers.”

Silence began to grow, people were watching them, she must say something else. “I—I didn’t know you were in town, Gloria.”

Gloria began to rattle. “Oh, just for a little. Stopped off between trains to look up some friends. Going on

to Des Moines in a few hours. But we missed our friends and had to have a bite. Mr. Whittaker is going to 'phone them again. They'll be pretty sure to be in now. The Hilliers. Perhaps you know who they are?"

"I met Mrs. Hillier once, I think. She's a clubwoman, isn't she?"

"I suppose so. Yes. We've got to go now. I'm *so* sorry we haven't more time. I'd love to talk with you, Arlie . . . about everything. And do write mother about Gerald. Send her some snapshots, too. You've no idea how she wants to see him." Murmurs of good-bye, and they walked on.

"I suppose I shoulda told her I was pleased to meet her again, or something," Ed mumbled. "Such nuts make me sick, though."

"Yes. . . ." She was watching Whittaker at the telephone, and Gloria, who was talking to Clara, the cashier. Clara turned to look at them and answered something that made Gloria lift her brows again and smile, coldly. Then she and Whittaker went into the lighted street.

When she stood by the cash register Arlie remembered this. She had been reasoning herself out of an irrational moment of disloyalty, caused by Whittaker's uniform and Ed's slouchy civilian clothes. It made the war too much the affair of other people. Whittaker and Gloria had absorbed, had been, America; she had to strain her loyalty through them, and the war was not so closely nor significantly hers. Even Phil—he was being ordered around by Whittaker, probably. She didn't need to wear herself out knitting. . . . Then Gloria's smile struck through at her.

"Listen, Clara, tell me: did that woman say anything to you about me? The one that just went out with the officer?"

"Asked me who you was."

"Who I was! Why, she's my—she was my sister-in-law!"

"Aw, come off."

"Honest. But what did you tell her?"

"Tell her? Why, I told her who you were: Mrs. Somers and Mr. Somers. Said you owned the Isis."

"Oh, did you?"—weakly.

"Yep, it ain't no lie, is it?" Clara smiled amiably and took another check and bill.

Arlie caught Ed's arm. He had not heard and she did not tell him. He wouldn't be able to understand what she felt. It would be harder now, with the money gone, but it would be her own life she was living—good as an old shoe. She fought back the denials pressing upon her. It *was* the life she wanted. She had chosen it herself. She wanted to feel that she wanted to dance—with happiness, but couldn't. Tomorrow she would, though.

4

But when tomorrow came she saw first the need of preparing Ed for what was coming. She tried hints but he was too preoccupied to notice them; she became dolefully pessimistic and was "sure that they'd lose it, now, just when they needed it most."

"Bosh!" he answered. "You were too slick for 'em. I'm no more than 'Mr. Somers,' the gink that owns the Isis, where you work. What do they know, or care, either?"

At last she told him what she had learned from Clara, and was surprised to find him so little perturbed. "All right, we'll cut out some of these extras you been complaining about. A lot of my ads don't pay. Seen it for a long time. Far as the Loans go, we can meet 'em somehow. Don't worry."

Two days later the letter came:

"Dear Arlie:

"I should far rather not write as I have to do in this letter. It is not an easy or a pleasant thing to tell another that she has at last been discovered in the practice of what I can only, and with charity, call prevarication. Why you should not have told us that you had married again I cannot conceive, except for the added ease you thought the money would give you, without your stopping to think of the dis-ease, yes, the disease, the money surely must have given your conscience.

"It is not the fact that it has been, occasionally, a little hard for us in these times when every dollar must be devoted to a sacred cause, to find the money for you. We gladly did that in remembrance of one who loved you enough to marry you despite the fact that you had already cheapened yourself. Once, I blamed you both for that, and yet was able to love you both and think of you as my children still—both of you, and try as best I could to do for you what had not been done. Then, when Herbert died, I wanted to provide for you still, to keep you as I knew my son would have wished, if only he could have lived. That, you prevented yourself, first, by leaving us to live in Des Moines—in what manner I do not know—and then by still further cheapening yourself by taking a position, a job, certainly below that which Herbert, not to say we—would have wished. Not content with that you marry the proprietor of the theatre in which you work and say no word to us. I do not know, Mrs. Somers, how long you have been married, nor do I care to know. I am only glad that no more permanent settlement was made for you than that which was made. But most of all I am glad to have back the boy I loved, for I feel that you who kept him so long have had to yield him up to me again, every day and every memory of him. Yes, I have him back. He was not to blame. You have made me sure of that. The fault was yours and yours alone, and but for you Herbert might still be alive, the pure strong boy I reared and loved. And he might even now be in France with his former comrades and playmates instead of lying in the cemetery at Lawson. That will mean nothing to you, I

suspect, but how much it would mean to me! To have Herbert fallen in action for his country rather than to have had his life frustrated by you.

"Yet even as I write, Arlie—and I come back to my letter after a long interruption—I cannot help feeling for you. Perhaps it is only that I want Gerald's mother to be finer than other women, and it cuts me to the heart to think that you are as I have written. Won't you come to see me, even now, and bring Gerald with you? Surely you would be happier without him and free to live with your husband as you would wish. At any time we stand ready legally to adopt him, if only you can see the plain advantages of such a plan. The time will come, and shortly, when you will feel a duty to let him come to us occasionally. Why not now, when it will be easier for him *to* come, before his affections are set?

"Of course there will be no more monthly checks, though we shall arrange credit up to a certain amount at one of the Grand Forks stores for his clothes, etc., to keep up that part of the plan. Soon, perhaps, we can make some more definite arrangement. But know always that Gerald must not suffer, and that he is always welcome—oh, so much *more* than welcome at his grandmother's home and in her heart.

"As for you, somehow I can feel, now as I close this letter, only sorrow for you, Arlie, by whom my own dear son did the right, the manly, and the honorable thing.

"Sincerely yours,

"LAURA J. SHUMAN."

Arlie refolded the letter and stared ahead with confused eyes. She was not what Mrs. Shuman implied, nor was Herb—but Herb was a wraith, a faded memory. He had never lived. She would pay back the money, bit by bit: it could be figured out, later. Then her head collapsed upon her arms and sobs shook her body, as through contradictions unnoted or unsolved, and through a fog of projected answers, denials, justifications, the hueless consciousness welled in her that a part of her life

was done that had meant more than she had suspected, that the pressure of time and life had closed a door on an uncomfortable brightness of possibility that vaguely, in memory and dream, had shown her a light by which she had been able, unknown to herself, to hope. That brightness had been closed away. Back, back, through the fog of hours and things done she sobbed and fought, desperately sinking, farther and farther, until the sobs quieted and she endured through a pain of silence.

5

It was not until the spring of 1918 that she saw Mat again. He came to the box office first, without pretending to look at the pictures. "Well, he said, "I'm going. Wanted to say good-bye first."

"You're going? Where?"

"War."

"But you can't enlist now; you're too old for the draft."

"That won't keep me from going. You'll see. This damn' Hun offensive is getting my goat. I'll get there too late, I suppose, but I feel as if I ought to stick myself into it somewhere. Haven't any one but a sister I hate, and she'll enjoy hanging out a little service flag."

She caught his hand under the counter. "Mat, don't go. I tell you not to. I can't stand it to have you. Please don't."

"Why not? I thought you was a little patriot, Arlie, fiercer than most of 'em." He looked at her glistening eyes.

"I know, I am. But I don't want you to go."

"You don't? . . . Arlie, say, you don't care a little for me, do you? It isn't that?"

She shook her head. "No, not that way I don't. I don't know why it is."

"Because it would make it easier to go if I knew you did."

She felt herself beginning to act: it was like a war story, only she was married and she didn't love Mat anyway. She must break through that swift, enclosing ring they had magically woven around themselves. Within it she was not herself, nor was Mat.

"I'll go with the K. C. if I can't go any other way," he said, breaking the silence and the ring.

"I didn't know you were a Catholic."

"It sorta stays with you."

When he had gone, with his quiet, bouncing step, his straw hat set firmly on his head, she tried to understand, but could not. Her fingers were being pried loose from something she had been clutching and valuing. She was slipping down into intolerable loneliness. If only she had whatever it was she had seen on beyond the Shumans, or if she had been able to keep Mat—just as he was and where he was.

6

The eleventh of November caught her by surprise. She had known the war must be drawing to a close, but the end and victory were to her only another smash of excitement, a burst of final and violent light . . . yet it was not to be final; her whole emotional system, organized and rooted in its darkness, could not believe that that fundamental chaos could end.

Ed had rushed into the rooms with the news. Hastily she had put Gerald's coat on him, and the three of them mingled with the crowds in the thickening streets, wandering from block to block, watching the people on the automobiles, on the trucks. Lunch they ate hurriedly and returned to the streets. Bunchie Mudge stopped a truck beside them, they clambered on, and through the afternoon blew horns into the clamor, a tin washtub banging

on the pavement behind. When they left the truck Gerald began to complain and plead for home and Gelke.

"I guess the boys are going to raise some hell with the Chink restaurant up the street. It's the only one that didn't close," Ed reported after conference with a near group. "Want to go along and watch?"

"No, I'll take Gerald home. Are we going to run tonight?"

"Don't know. See what Bunchie and the rest are going to do. Tell you later. The noise is sorta petering out, though. Guess maybe they'll want some place to go tonight."

When he had gone Arlie waited for a chance to cross the street. The noise was dwindling, but it was like the lull in the applause that comes just before redoubled volume. She was namelessly distressed; it was the end of the war. Nothing but the shouting now. It was all over. Of course everybody was glad. She was too. Hadn't she shouted with the best of them?

But as again she listened, all the confusion around her seemed a last rickety explosion, a grim clatter of celebration of some defeat she had herself suffered but which she could not comprehend. She picked up Gerald, and darted, poised, jumped on among the automobiles—safe, but as if pursued by the whole yapping street. With Gerald's hand in hers she fled along the dusky sidewalk, and touched with her hand the buildings that were becoming brown with the November evening.

7

She no longer read the papers. There was no nutrient in the details of peace. Her mother wrote that Phil, who had been in action, had come through safely. From that she forced a small gladness, only to discover that she had not been worried about him.

The next time her mother wrote it was to ask for money. Oliver was sick again, too sick to work; he might never be able to work. The mortgage they had finally paid off during the war, but they had no ready cash. The lodge was helping some but they needed more; "and I know you got it, so help out your ma and your poor father now if your ever going to." Arlie sent twenty dollars and knew that she could send little more.

The giving of the money was tribute to the past; and it carried part of herself with it to roam fretfully once more in that unquiet region. Were things in it, too, still to edge closer? She was helpless before it. She might have kept it off, in darkness, with more to throw. Instead it was snouting forward again into a misty and baleful twilight of awareness.

Then a letter came, one day, from Mat. She read the first part cheerfully, puzzled only that he should be writing her at all—he had never sent more than a post card before, and that to Ed. As she read the close she stiffened:

"I am not coming to Grand Forks for some time, but when I do come, Arlie, it is not going to be like it was. You can depend on that. It will be different. And I am not going away like I used to go."

But she didn't love Mat; she didn't even care for him now, he was so—so absurd, with his big forehead, questioning eyes and inconsequential chatter. Why should he act in this way when he had no other right than that given by an accidental charity? Why should he think her life was for him simply because he had, possibly, saved it—and, probably, had not?

But he was coming. . . . She would have to manipulate him apart from Ed and Gerald; she would have to make him stop dreaming. But how could she, when she

couldn't herself find what was real in this thinning life? She had tried, uselessly, sex, and it was not enough. She had been lifted up to a clearing light beyond, only to sink until she had tried to find a release in death. Profitless—through her own half-heart it had been profitless. She would not try that again.

And running against the walls of light and dark, driven before the glare of circumstance, hating the bounds but thinking to find only there change and satisfaction, she was caught suddenly back into the swift night: the rabbit in front of the automobile, chased and plunging, picked out of darkness by a force it fled but did not understand.

That rabbit she could not help seeing, could in no way shake out of her thought, and at times she herself fled, with ever at her back a hurtling bulk coming on with incredible speed, yet so eerily remote that it might never reach her.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WIFE

I

IN the first part of the following year the Isis was moderately prosperous, and Ed talked of buying an automobile. They would take a vacation, too. They hadn't had one since the Isis had been remodelled, and there had been more work to that than play. This time they would take a real vacation—buy a tent, some folding cots, a camp stove and follow the highways to the Minnesota lakes. But one sweltering Saturday midnight in June, when they sat at the dining-room table drinking lemonade and talking across copies of the *Motion Picture Universe* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, Arlie had urged him to add up their probable assets and their certain liabilities—of interest, film rent, etc. As a result Ed decided on a second-hand Ford.

Arlie rebelled. If they couldn't have anything but a Ford they'd get along without. But in elaborating her objections it was not until she mentioned the likelihood of a tip-over that Ed considered her objections seriously. "Oh! I'd forgotten. Say, my head's solid ivory. Of course we won't get a Ford."

But it had not been the memory of sorrow or accident which locked her in opposition; rather it was the memory of wider and golden days in the Shuman car and in the Ford which Herb had driven into the yard so proudly

that first summer at Bright Valley. With the passing of the present summer in Grand Forks, and hot weary days selling tickets under the fan that had been long out of order, her disappointment became sullen whenever she saw a tourist car turning down the street.

She reminded Ed of the plan in the fall, when they met the semi-annual interest on their notes only by conveniently forgetting to pay Mrs. Gelke the rent for two months. "What kinda figuring did you do when you were going to buy that Ford last summer?" she asked. "The kind I guess I do too often," he admitted dolefully; and she restrained the impulse, summoned by habit, to ask a small forgiveness for unpleasantly reminding him.

Ed spoke of it off and on during the winter, but after Bunchie Mudge remodelled in the spring, and on the strength of new projectors, "the comfortablest seats in Iowa," and a "Heliobrite" screen, most lavishly advertised feature after feature, he mentioned it but once. Then, when the days grew long and warm, opening in invitation to the highways, he spoke of borrowing money for a car from Mat, but Arlie pointed out that since they hadn't seen him for two years, and hadn't heard from him, except for a card of greeting at Christmas, they'd better not take for granted too much benevolence on his part. More silent than usual Ed agreed.

The next day Arlie took down the fan from its bracket and stored it in one of the now unused dressing-rooms at the rear of the Isis. If she was to be hot, she decided, she would not be irritated by the consciousness of a broken fan overhead.

2

Toward the first of July that year she received another letter from her mother. Her father was dying and

wanted to see her. She'd better come within a week if she wanted to see him alive.

She arrived in Coon Falls early in the afternoon of the Fourth, when the celebration was reviving after the noon lull. It depressed her to edge through the crowds lining Main Street, along the entire length of which automobiles were solidly parked. "Don't they have any horses and buggies any more?" she asked Phil, who carried her suitcase. "You don't expect 'em in Grand Forks, but I did here, sort of."

"Don't see any, do you?" he asked. "Not such a bad little burg, this, really. Damn' lot of money made around here in the last year or so, too. Land. That's one reason we're celebrating again this year, I guess. Ain't had one for I don't know when."

She looked at her brother, taller now than she, with an indefinite hardness in his face, and yet with a little of the gentleness of her father in the eyes that appraised her as she him. "You've changed a lot, Phil, haven't you?" she said.

"Oh, I don't know. Seem about the same to myself as I always did. I'd say you're the one that's changed."

"I? How?"

"Oh, you got a look on your face, in your eyes. I don't get it."

She laughed. "Where you working now?"

"Horack's Grocery. Took Jarvis's place. He was killed, you know, in France."

"Ray! Ray Jarvis!"

"Yep. But I'm going to get out of there when I get married and go to farming."

"You! Married . . . and farming! Who you going to marry, Phil?"

"Debbie Kittifer. Remember her?"

Debbie Kittifer. The name sounded familiar. "Oh, yes, she worked at the Bijou once. Little tot."

"Well, she ain't a little tot no more. Tall as you are, almost." He snapped open his watch and Arlie saw a carefully enclosed snapshot of a laughing girl, her hair blown to sunny wisps. She might have been a slender sister of Belle Ritchie.

As they neared the house she noted that it was blistered and badly in need of paint, and not at all of the bright yellow of other days. Phil opened the door with its familiar colored glass and she found her mother coming down the hallway. "Why, ma! It's—gee, it's good to see you and be home again once!"

"You been a long time coming, Arlie, if I do say it." They kissed, and Mrs. Gelston drew back to survey Arlie critically. "Well, you ain't dressed so floosey as I thought you'd be. Sorta thought you togged yourself out these days, with all your money."

"Money, ma! Why, I haven't any money, only what we got in the Isis."

"Didn't that Shuman leave you none? I thought—"

"We'll talk later. I want to see pa now. That's what I come for." As she went upstairs, with Mrs. Gelston puffing after, Arlie reflected that her mother was beyond plumpness now, she was undeniably fat, with the flabbiest of double chins. How could her father have married her, or have cared for her, at any time? Surely he couldn't now. What, then, kept them together?

She found her father looking up from the bed with an eagerness in his eyes like blue fire. His shaggy hair was completely gray, and his face slim and colorless. Taking his hand as she sat down on the edge of the bed, she looked still into those blue eyes, whose burn seemed to find in her something long desired and cooling. She pressed his hand tighter.

"Why don't you say something, you two?" Mrs. Gelston demanded.

Without turning Arlie spoke. "Ma, you go down and get my suitcase, will you? I forgot it."

"Go yourself. Think I'm going to wait on you now? . . . But I'll get out, if that's what you mean." She went.

"I'm glad I come, pa. I didn't—didn't know you were so sick."

"I'm not so sick, Arlie. I was talking to the doctor this morning. He thinks I got months left yet, anyway." He paused. "But for a while I made him let 'em think so. Thought maybe it'd get you here. I been wanting to see you, Arl."

"I know. I've wanted to see you, too."

Imponderables pressed into the fragile and precious silence that enclosed them. Finally, to prevent that silence from fading into mere absence of words, Arlie spoke, moved about the room, peered out the window, and chatted of Gerald, of the Isis, of changes in Coon Falls. "Phil's changed a lot, too, don't you think, pa?"

"Yep. Guess he has all right. He's settled down, too, better'n most of the boys who're coming back. Going to marry a nice girl, too. She's got an eighty out south."

"My, I'm glad. I was always a little afraid Phil wouldn't turn out well. I guess, though, most sisters think that."

Oliver smiled and ran a hand through his gray hair.

"I guess I'm going to have gray hair early like you, pa. I keep snipping them out all the time. It sorta runs in families, don't it?"

"My dad was gray," he answered, "ever since I can remember."

"Yes?"

"But Arlie, you ain't told me about your new husband. What's he like?"

She tried to tell him, and as they talked the afternoon

deepened. For long intervals they would be silent. At last her father dozed and she sat listening to the far-off noises of the day—not so loud, she thought, as in former years. She tucked the spread around his foot that had emerged, a veined and swollen foot, and went down to talk with her mother. When she returned he was awake and his foot was out again.

"Here, pa, you'd better get that foot covered up."

"Let it alone," he said irritably. "I want it out. It's too hot."

Evening came, with a fullness of sunset over the town, and Arlie knew she would leave shortly. Yet she did not tell her father. "I'll go down and get something to eat, pa, and bring you your supper." After he had eaten the permitted meal, which her mother had been wholly willing she prepare, she told him she must go. "Only wish I could buy my ticket from you, pa. Next time, I will. I'm sure, too, you're going to get better."

"I'm glad you didn't tell me earlier you had to go to-night. Do you, really?" She nodded. "Because then I wouldn't have enjoyed you so much, if I'd had to think you were going all the time. And I went and slept some too."

"I thought it would be better that way, pa."

What was this strange growth between them in the twilight? a silvery companionship that could come to no disaster but an end—with his death, and that would not be disaster but healing, in which all, becoming quiet, would be perfect.

"Good-bye, pa. I got to go now or I'll miss my train." She touched his dry lips with her own, looked at him again, and went—alone this time, for Phil had taken Debbie to a dance.

She might have staid longer; nothing imperative was drawing her back to Grand Forks. Yet she was going, even as she wondered why, since her coming had meant

so much to him, she had not remained. But no—to stay would be only to disturb and cheapen with familiarities what lay between them. It was right that she follow the plan made before she left Grand Forks.

In the noise of Main Street opening about her she felt relief. There was even relief in not having to be longer in the old house. A tall country lad, who looked like Ned Rickenberg, threw at her a handful of confetti that flew into her eyes, her nostrils, her mouth. She spat it out, tried to laugh, and went on.

3

Home again, she put down her suitcase, kissed Gerald, and turned to Ed. He was blowing his nose. "Well, Ed, I'd think you could do better by me than get a cold while I'm gone! In July, too. I just come from one sick man."

"How is your father?" he evaded, stuffing his handkerchief into his hip pocket.

"He's pretty sick, though he ain't so sick as I thought he was. Don't you have any clean handkerchiefs?"

He looked at her stupidly. "I guess so. Why?"

"Because, that one you got is perfectly filthy. Put it out in the basket and let me get you another." She brought him a fresh one. "How'd you get your cold, anyway?"

"Wandering around with Mat the night you left."

"Oh, is he back?"

"Yeh, come here for the Fourth, and he made me go for a walk. Late, it was, and he hiked me all over town and out along the river, and I'd started without a coat and it got chilly. I tried to get him to come up and spend the night with me. He wouldn't come near the place."

"No? How is he now?"

"He's a queer nut. I don't like him as well's I used

to. I guess the war sorta went to his head. Acts strange as the devil. Walks along for a mile without saying a word, and then starts in and talks a blue streak. Never got nothing out of life, he says. Didn't get to go to France. *Always* just missing things. You'd think his not getting to France was sending him crazy."

"But why wouldn't he come up here?"

"I don't know. Said you might come in and not like it, and when I told him you couldn't possibly get back before this morning he just started off on a tangent and talked his head off. About France again."

"Is he in town yet?"

"Uh-uh. Left yesterday afternoon."

Arlie walked about examining the rooms. Some unwashed dishes were piled near the gas plate by the one window of the kitchenette. The floor was littered with Gerald's playthings. The bed was tumbled and unmade.

"Did Gerald stay with Gelke?"

"Mostly. . . . Say, d'you suppose a man could work up a whole vaudeville sketch out of a cold? Man and a woman, you know. Both have colds, and try to make love. Ever see anything like that?"

"Not unless you have. All I seen I seen with you in Des Moines."

"Kinda seems to me I have . . . something like it anyway, though maybe it was only for a line or two. Good idea, though. I'm going to write Dinky about it. Bet they could make a go of it."

"Oh, Ed, you funny old dear!" Arlie put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Why am I?"

"Because you are. Always thinking of such things."

"Oh, you think it would go, do you?"

She laughed herself into his arms and kissed him again. "Maybe it would, I don't know, but you're funny because you think of it."

"Better not kiss me again," he warned her. "You'll get my cold."

"Let me!" She smacked him vigorously.

"Say, that ought to be worked into it? What? . . . Something like that, anyway. Where's a pencil? I'm going to jot these down."

"You don't need a pencil," she said, rising. "I'll fix you a dose of castor oil."

"Oh, don't, Arlie, please. Honest, this isn't anything. I'll shake it off in a day or two. You save the castor oil for Gerald. Besides, I want to talk to you about the Isis. Fact is, reason I thought of that act was we need some more money. The pictures ain't paying so well. I figured a lot while you was gone."

4

Through the fall the attendance at the Isis dwindled, slightly but noticeably, and the result was even more perceptible in the books, for expenses did not fall. The crash of prices on the stock exchange was making itself felt more generally.

"I guess I cut down too much," Ed admitted one day many weeks later, "when we stopped getting that other money. Way things go you begin to see how bad the location really is. I was just lumping things together too much. You see, we got to draw 'em this way with something big, and you can't do it all the time. Wish I had the Isis where Bunchie is, I'd show him a thing or two. Way it is, there's nothing of itself to draw 'em down here in the evenings. Business all goes the other direction. All the new buildings that are going up are over on Marshall Street. We don't get much except them that's got the Isis habit. You see darn' few new faces, and the more corn the farmers burn the fewer we'll see."

"Would it help to use serials, Ed?"

"No sir! Lower the tone of your house and you never get back. I wouldn't think of that for a minute. The Isis is going to keep its rep'. Trouble is now, the old fans start from the other side of town and get drawed in at Bunchie's and the others. All we got the other side of us is the workingmen."

"Can't we get them? Why not play for them in our ads somehow?"

"Yes, I thought of that. But the truth is, Arl, we got to go slow on ads now if we're going to have anything to live on. We sunk too much cash when we didn't need to, that's all. I guess I overadvertised, too. My stuff don't pull any more. . . . But anyway I don't want my house stunk up with a lot of wops and bohunks. Damn 'em, I say!"

Arlie resisted an "I told you so," shunting its energy into: "It seems like our bungalow gets farther and farther off. I get to thinking sometimes it'd be a good thing to sell the Isis and get a home for once."

"Wha'd I do then?"

"Why you could—maybe you could be a projectionist. I'll bet you'd be a good one."

"That'd be a hell of a bright idea, wouldn't it! Gosh, I can hear Bunchie laugh now."

"Oh no, Ed. . . . Ugh! How could I think of it!" She went to him swiftly. "I didn't mean it, Ed, honest I didn't. I wouldn't have you just that for anything."

"Sure?" He pulled her to his lap, placed an arm around her, and one hand on her knee. It was a home-like hand, she thought, and then tried not to think of it. "I love you, Ed," she murmured quickly, darkening with her words what she had been about to think. "I love you."

His arm tightened around her in answer. "You're a good kid, Arlie. I'm glad I got you for a wife."

In the next week Ed complained of another cold. His body ached, he said, and he felt "woozy." Arlie sent him to bed and called a doctor, who diagnosed the case as influenza. "Not serious now," he added, "but you must be very careful. Too many of these are going into pneumonia."

Hastily Arlie called in Mrs. Gelke and went to have the prescriptions filled. She returned to find Ed fretting about the Isis. "Now look here, Ed, you forget about the Isis for a while. You been going there every day for years, and you need a vacation and you're going to get it, that's all. I haven't been around that place all these years for nothing. Every single thing I've done one time or another, and if I have to do them all for a while, what's the diff? Besides, I don't. You got a good projectionist and a force that knows its business. Gelke will look after you and I'll look after the Isis. Just forget it, turn over, and go to sleep."

Meekly he obeyed.

"I'm glad Gerald'll be at school," she told Mrs. Gelke. "That'll help some."

She wanted to stay with Ed, to nurse him herself, but knew that her presence would mean only another worry for him. He had always worried, even when for a little while some one other than herself had handled the money.

The first day or two she found very difficult. Things that had seemed small in themselves filled every crevice of the day. She had no time to worry about her husband. Then she began to find her way about. "It's just like dishes," she told herself. "Get 'em scraped and piled and the rest is easy. It's the confusion that discourages you. The first thing to do is to get rid of the confusion." She listed, then, all the tasks she could think of, and went over the list with Johnson, the latest "projectionist." The

larger number of duties she took upon herself, gave some to Johnson—who grumbled but accepted—and saw to it daily that everything was being done. The advertisements were hardest to do. First she went through Ed's files to find models. He had never been content to use the material sent him; always it had been changed or discarded. It was an unfamiliar and agonizing business, but it had to be done. The simple bookkeeping she dared not attempt, and telephoned the business college for a student to work nights.

Satisfaction mingled with fear when Ed's influenza passed into pneumonia. The deliberate organization of the work had prepared her for longer trouble. "Get a nurse," she said, when the doctor told her. She felt weak and faint, yet about to be efficient. She knew that she had to keep the Isis running, and knew furthermore that she had to make it pay.

Followed nights almost sleepless. Nights colored by the brightness of those hours when she would be called, or wake, and slip on an old kimono to wander in from her cot in the dining-room to see Ed. When she was at the Isis it seemed to her that she had not slept at all, that she had not been away from the theatre; and when she was at home the Isis was no more than a rainy glimpse of itself on its own screen. All her being was then in the room where Ed lay sick, and the only reality was the nurse's white uniform and peaked cap, Mrs. Gelke's noiseless and productive visits, and Ed's long form beneath the bed-clothes, his delirious face and hot hands.

The crisis passed in a long, bright nightmare, when all she could see was Ed's confused hair above the bearded, oblivious face; when all she could hear was his breathing, and all she could do was to sit in aching anxiety by his side, wanting to hold his hand. She roused herself at last from a daze of sleep through which everything had persisted in hectic particularity. The doctor was in the

room. "It's all right now, Mrs. Somers. He's going to pull through, barring a relapse, of course. Thought we were going to lose him once. Better get some sleep now."

She fumbled her way through the dining-room and across the hall to Mrs. Gelke's door, where she rapped softly, then louder at the silence within. Presently Mrs. Gelke opened the door. "You want me? Is he worse?"

"No, the crisis is past, the doctor says. . . . Thought you'd like to know."

"That's good, that's fine," she heard Mrs. Gelke say, and started back to her cot.

Just why had she roused the poor woman, anyway? The morning would have been soon enough. She couldn't tell. Wearily she crawled between the cotton blankets—there hadn't been time for sheets lately. He was going to get well. That was what she had been fighting for. The victory was won. Was she too tired to care, to be glad a little, or wasn't she glad? But how could she be anything else but glad? And her father was getting better, her mother had written; and Phil was married. . . .

6

In the next few days she went often to Ed's room, oftener than her time conveniently permitted. She was trying to discover in his wasted and lengthened face, in the touch of him, some compensation other than the gratitude he offered.

"You been awful good to me, Arlie. Hadn't been for you I'd never of pulled through."

"I didn't do much, Ed. It was the doctor and the nurse and Gelke."

"Yes you did. I didn't have to worry about the Isis. Just kept saying to myself whenever I thought of it,

'Arlie's running it, Arlie's running it,' and you were, too."

"Yes, I've really made it go, Ed. But we'll talk of that later. You got to get well now, and worrying won't help you."

But for other reasons she did not want to talk to him of the Isis. Unknown to him, on the expiration of a contract, she had changed the film service, substituting more reels of purely slapstick comedy, western material, and the perilous serials Ed had always avoided. To advertise the new films she had reduced the space in the *Gazette* and *Tribune* to mere notices, but had distributed handbills throughout the poorer and more congested streets. On two evenings, between six and seven, she had herself gone to the long line of mouldy lodging houses and dim-eyed restaurants on Milman Street, seeing to it that each bill reached a person or was left in some greasy but conspicuous place. Later it had been a satisfaction to note how many faces she recalled—and greeted with a smile.

With the help of a sign-painter the lobby had become a flamboyant maze of crude colors, in the center of which she sat each evening, her face pale, eager and sharp behind the plate glass of the ticket booth. She would smile, now and then, at some laborer, and sell him a box seat at thirty-five cents. On one night she almost filled the boxes; and thereafter it was a game played again with a smile, a greeting, and fingers that hesitated between the two rolls of tickets. She found, too, that a touch on the sign-painter's shoulder, and a tacit permission to lean close to her when she went to examine the progress of his work, subtracted dollars from his bills.

It was chiefly in subtraction, she found when she examined the accounts, that money was made. The attendance had increased, yes, but they didn't have the packed houses of former days. On the other hand there was less to be paid out—less for films, for ushers, for

newspaper advertising; and the money that had formerly gone into the "Isis Screen" just about met the expenses of handbills and signs.

When Ed called her one day as she was leaving she turned back to him in fear, thinking he must have learned in some way of the changes at the Isis.

"There's something I been wanting to tell you, Arlie," he began, looking at her breast and not her eyes. "I guess maybe you know what it's about . . . don't you?" He looked up briefly, and her heart beat more rapidly. *Had* he found out? Had Gelke told him? She was glad the nurse had gone.

"I think maybe I know."

"I thought you would. That makes it easier in a way, and in a way it don't. . . . I didn't want to tell you before. I was afraid you'd just pretend to forgive me—out of pity, you know."

"Forgive you?"

"Yes, but I wanted you to know just how much, and how little, too, considering, there was *to* forgive."

"Yes . . . ?"

"About that Houghton girl."

"Seraphine?"

"Yes—Seraphine Houghton." He could not seem to speak the given name alone. "I been wanting to tell you a long time. I don't suppose you'll believe me, though. There wasn't anything you didn't see, nothing. All there was happened right in that room there"—he pointed. "Nothing when I took her home, honest to God there wasn't, Arlie. I was too tight to go straight as it was; and when we got there—why some one come out for her. Her brother, maybe."

She smiled. "And if some one hadn't come out I suppose there *would* have been something." She wished the words back as soon as she had said them.

"I don't know, Arlie. . . . I was tight, I can't tell,

can't remember very well. I won't say as to that. I only know what happened and what didn't happen, and I'm giving you the straight dope on that. Funny thing, too . . . it should all of been at the Isis and in that room there. . . ."

"Well, don't worry about it. I believe you all right . . . and I'm glad you told me."

Did her words sound as hollow to Ed as they did to herself? She tried to reinforce their effect with a kiss and a pat, and puzzled over the question of why she was disappointed, a little, that he had told her. It made him too much like Gerald, confessing some minor sin. Did something in her want him to have been unfaithful completely? Or to have bluffed her with denial? Did she no longer care for him? Was he only a larger Gerald to her now? And if so, what was the use of it all, and to what had she come?

8

It was the day after Ed got up for the first time but was still confined to the rooms that Mat returned again. Arlie had been sitting in the little office which she had made for herself out of the "Ladies' Rest Room" that Ed had installed when the Isis was remodelled, but which had seldom been used. She had taken off the brass sign, sold one of the wicker rockers, and put the books and the old typewriter on the cheap and fragile writing desk. On this she was pounding out a letter when she looked up and saw Mat standing in the doorway.

"Well hello, stranger! Come into my parlor said the spider to the fly, if you can *get* in. There'll be room for you in that rocker if you don't rock too much. Come on in. . . . Don't stand there like a ninny. Aren't you going to shake hands with me after all this time?" She rose to offer him a cool hand. With a mumble he shook

it and sat down, placing his hat beside him on the green-carpeted floor.

"Better take your overcoat off, it's hot in here."

"No, can't stay long. Just dropped in to say hello."

"Why didn't you then?"

He looked at her foolishly and bit his nails.

"Well, aren't you going to talk to me? Here, when I haven't seen you for I don't know how long—two years anyway, and it seems like five."

"Are you glad to see me?" he asked with nervous abruptness.

"Of course I'm glad to see you. What a question! But tell me about yourself. What you been doing?"

"Selling—same as usual. But what are *you* doing? Making money for the old boy?"

"You mean Ed? He's been awful sick, you know. I had to run the Isis and home too. It's fagged me out a little, but now Ed's better I kinda like it. I don't want Ed sick, but I'll hate to give it up when he comes back."

"You musta made a go of it, then. How'd you do it?"

She told him. "Trouble is, though," she concluded, "Ed's going to be struck all of a heap when he tumbles to the pictures I been showing. That's where I'd like to have you to help me, Mat."

"Me? How?"

"By helping me convince him that I've done the best thing—showing this rough and wooly stuff."

"I'd think the receipts would convince him quick enough. Most men'll listen to what money has to say."

"The trouble is, Ed won't. He has ideals. It's a dream show-shop he's running, not the Isis. *I* run the Isis."

"Yes, and damn' well too, I bet. If he dcn't see it he's not worth bothering with."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I guess you know what I mean all right."

Flashingly she erased the beginning perception of what he did mean and looked at him, sitting dolefully erect and stiff in the rocking-chair. He was thinner in body, yet his head seemed larger, and there was a stolid glitter in his eyes.

"No," she answered slowly, "I don't know what you mean . . . and I don't think I ever will."

"Oh yes you will," he said, and squirmed a little.

"Mat," she laughed, "are you sitting on a tack? You act that way."

"Maybe I am," he replied, mournfully smiling, "but you shouldn't offer me a chair with a tack in it."

Arlie turned to the typewriter. "You come back when you're feeling cheerfuller. You really got to help me in this, that's all there is to it. And if you're not going to, why maybe . . . maybe you'd better not come back at all."

In a voice thickened with repression he answered, "I'll come back all right, but my cheerfulness is going to depend on you, and a lot of other things too."

Then, with one hand on the jamb of the door as he stood just outside, he added: "Don't worry, I'll come back all right."

His quickening steps crossed the foyer, and her ears felt the puff of the closing outer door. His words recalled the end of the letter he had written. She had almost forgotten that. Bitterness contracted her. Was she never again to find that gleaming quiet she had known? Crude discordance, harsh colors: brown, blue, crimson. . . . She ripped her letter from the typewriter and went home.

CHAPTER XXVI

MAT

I

IF MAT would not help her she would have to help herself. She made Ed lie down, and worked, futilely, about the house. At last she collected some mending and sat by his side. How might she approach it? For the remainder of the morning, between remarks, she pondered; at times almost breaking into it.

"What you thinking about? Got something on your mind?" he inquired.

"No . . . nothing."

"Aren't things going all right at the Isis?"

"Of course they are. Stop worrying."

The next morning she lingered after breakfast until Gerald had been long at school. She *would* tell him; yet at the point of speech she had courage for only a compromise: "You know, Ed, I been thinking . . . about the Isis. I been watching the crowds we get, and the people that pass outside, and I been thinking that if we took another kind of film we could make more money. They want more action, more movement, more slapstick stuff, and not so many millionaires' dining-rooms; and we'd save money on the film rent."

"That's where you're off, though. That's what they do want; it's the only way they'll ever get it. They lap it up."

"But they *haven't* been lapping it. You know well as I we haven't been getting the houses we used to get. It's those who're a little nearer to it that want that, those that really got *something* and want a lot more."

"You're off again. It's them that never can get it that want it most. We got a bum location, that's all."

"But Ed, maybe they don't want it all the time. Maybe they like it once in a while—we can't get 'em all the time at that. The other shows have too much of what we give, and have it in brighter places, specially now that Bunchie has remodelled and all. He's making an awful splurge. But it seems to me if we could get them for the other kind of thing, and be the only house giving it regularly, why we'd always get 'em whenever they wanted that; and we wouldn't be spending so much, either, as I said before."

"No sir, I won't listen to it. If I can't run the best kind of house with the best kind of pictures, I'm through, that's all. I'll run a chop suey house first. Gosh . . . it makes me sick to think of it even. . . ." He walked to the bed, weakly, and lay down.

Arlie left. She had to get away in order to think. Now it was worse than ever. Why hadn't she told him outright what she had done and how much the Isis was clearing? As it was she had only roused a thick, dull opposition, the mastering of which might really make him ill again.

When he brought up the subject himself the next morning she argued, fell silent, appeared to acquiesce.

Mat came in again on Friday and she told him of the situation. "About what I'd thought would happen," he said. "It'd only have been worse if you'd told him the truth. He can't stand it to look at facts or figures. Never could. That's why he went broke in Sioux City. You can't tell me anything about Ed. Know him better'n you do."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way, Mat."

"Why not?"—aggressively.

"Because, he's my husband . . . and I love him."
(Why had she added the last?)

Mat sat up straighter than ever. His words tumbled: "Yes, he's your husband all right, but don't tell me that you love him. It's absolutely, teetotally impossible for you to love him. Furthermore, you never did love him, really, and I'm damn' sure he never loved you. He married you for the money you had, that's what he did. He couldn't love anybody but himself, that man couldn't."

"Mat, you're talking too much. I do love Ed."

"You don't—"

"But I do. Look how I've worked for him, and humored him, and cared for him. Think I'd do that for a man I didn't love? You're miles off."

"I tell you, you don't love him. You pity him, that's all. You pity him."

Light, shattering around her, went out. "I . . . I do . . . love him, I mean. I tell you I do," she flung at him. "Get out. Get out of here, out of the room."

Words burned from his eyes. She could not look at him, but gestured blindly, as if he would fly before her moving hands. She began to weep and between her sobs she pleaded, "Get out!" and more weakly, "go—go on. I don't want you here."

He stood glaring down at her. "All right," he said, "I'll go, but remember, I'm coming back. I'm coming back Sunday morning. Right to this room. And you're coming here. We're going to talk this out. Do you hear? Sunday morning."

"We're not . . . we're not . . . we . . ." She gestured feebly, and as the noise of his footsteps lessened, added: "I'm not, I mean. I'm not. I don't care what you do." She wanted, in some fashion, utterly to destroy the "we" she had used: "I'm not, I'm not," she repeated

and repeated, trying to cross the "we" out of existence, but she succeeded only in rendering it more elusively there than ever.

2

Sunday was coming too quickly, she realized on Saturday morning.

"What you look at me so funny for?" Ed asked.

"Didn't know I was," she responded, and knew as she spoke that she had been following his every expression and movement, searching.

"Any one'd think I was tottering around, the way you watch me. Makes me wonder if I *am* getting well, and when I get to thinking about it I want to lie down. Guess I will, too."

She sat down beside him, stroking his hand as if she could call back to it some vitality it missed.

"It's all right, Ed," she murmured absently.

"What is?"

. . . "About Seraphine. I know you love me, just me . . . and I do you."

Weariness sheathed his face. "I'm glad you feel that way, Arlie. I . . . it was hard to tell you, but I sorta felt I had to."

"I know, Ed. . . ."

"Let's not talk about it . . . I'm tired, sort of." He turned his face to the wall.

"Poor boy, you must be. You mustn't try to get up yet."

She stretched out by his side, on top of the quilt he had drawn over himself, and stroked his forehead. "I love you so much, Ed, I love you so much. . . . Not even Gerald means anything to me. Just you . . . and I want you to get well quick."

Reaching up for her hand he held it, saying nothing until she withdrew it and rose. "I got to get back."

She wanted him to get well, yes, for more than one reason: for himself, and for her, that she might disentangle her feeling for him when he was well from what she felt when he was sick. As she walked back to the Isis an unreasoning irritation grew in her—he was getting well so slowly. She tried to fight it back, to choke and harass it out of her. All that Saturday afternoon and evening she wrestled with it, and, for wavering blind moments was herself held and thrown.

At breakfast on Sunday she attempted again to win him over to the change of pictures. She explained, elaborated, pleaded, predicted ruin.

"Arlie!" he shouted at her finally, "I tell you once and for all I won't listen to it! You don't need to talk about it again. Never! do you hear! It's the last thing on earth I'll do!"

"Well, it's not the last thing *I'll* do, I can tell you that, Ed Somers. Before I'd see my wife and her baby starve, or live in a miserable little hovel over a damn' store! No sir! Or before I'd let my husband go without care when he's sick. I don't know what you are, but I know damn' well what I am. How do you think we're going to pay the nurse, and the doctor bills? On what we were making before? I tell you no. But you can bet they're going to be paid all right."

"We can pay 'em with the Liberty Loans."

"We can't do nothing of the kind. Furthermore, I got the nurse paid already."

"How'd you do it?"

"Slapstick and western stuff, and handbills on Milman Street when I started the serial. I took some of 'em there myself. That's how. I changed when the contract ran out, before you began to get well even. And we're making money. See?"

He looked at her out of sunken dull eyes. "Oh," he said.

She threw on her coat and hat. "I'm going down to the Isis. When I come back I'll tell you how much we've made."

Justified, she went, but knew as she went that she would have gone in any case, that she could in no way have resisted going.

3

She waited for Mat in the bright miniature office. Dull occasional sounds of automobiles passing along the street, and now and then a gleam of words penetrated the loud silence of the house. The Isis was peopled that morning with ghostly audiences and a scurry of dreams, mingled of all those folk of light and shadow who had entered the unreal rooms on the screen, galloped across the impermanent white roads and rising hills, all to fade out with the light. Ghost of the real, ghosts of the unreal, blended to the shadowy harmony that was the Isis. As a quieting whisper it lulled her, and she faced Mat, when he came, with a still face.

"I knew you'd be here," he announced, laying his coat and hat across the typewriter before sitting down.

"Did you?"

"Yep. And I knew I'd be here; that we both would. Couldn't help it, could we?"

"I don't know. I suppose not." She could not look at him, but at last she forced herself to look, through a trembling confusion, and knew by a subtle reach of instinct that as all was blurring away for her, so it was for him. He edged his chair closer.

. . . . "No, we come to talk, Mat. . . . Don't. . . ."

"Don't what?"

"Don't come closer. . . ." She could hardly speak the words, but he had nevertheless come, his arm was around her and she had given way, letting her head fall upon his

chest. He was half kneeling, half standing, by her chair.

"It's no use, girl. Why fight it? We can't help it. We were made for each other. You know I love you. I always have, especially since that night, when you almost got away from us."

A sob rose in her, followed by others. "It's too hard, Mat. I can't explain. Don't ask me to. It's too much for me. I can't see around it."

"See around what, dear?"

"You, and Ed, and Gerald. And my father's dying. Herb's dead. I hardly know Gerald any more. And the Shumans . . ."

"Who're the Shumans?"

"Herb's . . . my first husband's folks." She sat up and pushed him gently away. "Sit down. I don't know what's the matter with me." She shivered and they were silent.

"Why did you have to come, Mat?"

"I couldn't help it. Ever since that night, I've loved you. When I saw how little *he* cared for you, my God, I couldn't stand it."

"But he does, he loves me."

"Looked like it that night, didn't it? Nice time he had with Seraphina, or whatever her name was."

"But that didn't mean anything. He confessed it all to me."

"Confessed? When you could see it right before your eyes? Hell of a lot a confession like that means!"

"But he didn't know how much I'd drunk myself. And he was drunk. But what he confessed was—that there wasn't any more than I saw."

"Oh—he confessed that, did he? Confessed he hadn't anything to confess. . . ." His laughter was forced and raucous.

"I don't *mean* confess, I . . . oh, can't you see? It's

all so muddled that way. I know it sounds silly, the way I tell it."

"Well . . . have you 'confessed' about the Isis yet?"

"I told him this morning."

"Wha'd' he do?"

"Nothing, just looked at me. Said 'Oh'. . . . came down here."

"Didn't thank you for making it pay any, did he?"

"No."

"Thought not. And yet you go around pitying him because he's sick and can't play around with things like he used to. That's all there is to your love for him. Pity . . . my Lord! I wouldn't have a woman I loved pitying me instead of loving me."

"Pity lasts longer, Mat."

He started to reply, but closed his mouth and swallowed. "Humph. . . . Lasts longer, does it? . . . But what's it worth while it does last? How'd you like to have Ed pity you instead of love you?"

"I couldn't stand it."

"Then think what you're offering him. And what he's got to offer you, when he don't either love you or pity you neither?"

She made no reply.

"Arlie, look here"—obediently she raised her eyes—"I got something to tell you. Love wipes pity out, see. Wrings it dry. Tosses it away. Ain't no room left for it. Love burns up everything else, I tell you. Makes it ashes. No—look at me. And I love you, and Arlie, down in your heart you love me. You know you do. You're going to come to me now. Why? Because you love me. You can't help it. You're coming, do you hear!" She felt herself rise and stand and tremble. Reaching hands. "See, I told you." He met her, and she clung to him sobbing so that her body shook and shook in his arms.

"There, there, girl. You're all right now. You're with me, and I'm with you. Don't cry now. It's all all right. . . . Just look up and kiss me. You haven't kissed me yet."

Her face lifted to his, but her lips did not move in response. "Tell me, Arlie, tell me you love me."

"I can't. . . . I don't know what love is, any more. I don't know what anything is. Maybe I came because I don't love you, because I don't love anybody."

He drew her to the chair and held her. For hours, it seemed to her, she was flexibly passive in his arms, sinking beneath his handling into a deeper and deeper and delirious shame.

At last she roused herself and was free. "Mat, it can't go on." Stupor was giving way to action. "I can't go on with you. I don't know why. But I can't. And things can't go farther than they have this morning. That isn't enough. But they're never going that far again. I feel like I wanted to sink into the earth and be swallowed up. How can I go home now, to Ed?"

"You don't need to."

"You're a fool."

"Well, we'll see. . . . Take your time. Think it over. Listen, though, I can't be coming back here so much. Suppose you write me in Des Moines." He handed her a card, which she tossed on the desk.

"Just think it over, that's all I ask. How'd you like only pity yourself, and how are you going to like having neither love nor pity? Just write me the answer to them questions, will you?"

Snow had whitened the street, and the reflected brilliance of the sun dazzled their eyes with sharp colors as they emerged from the Isis and separated.

CHAPTER XXVII

SOLITAIRE

I

ON her return she flung together a hasty dinner, waiting until she had it entirely ready before she went to the bedroom door to call Ed. There was no response from the blanket-muffled form. "Come on, Ed, dinner's ready."

"Don't want any. Not hungry."

"Oh, I think you'd better eat something. Just a little."

"Go on. Let me alone."

"All right. Come on then, Gerald, *we'll* eat."

Gerald, flat on his stomach before a book, his heels kicking in the air, didn't even glance up as he turned the page. "Don't want none neither."

"For that matter," she thought, "I don't either, but I suppose I'd better. No use getting dinner for no one." But after a few mouthfuls she ceased; she simply was not hungry, and there was too much pressing for thought.

"Mother, can I take my sled over to Thirteenth Street hill to slide this afternoon?" Gerald brought his book to the table.

"Oh, I suppose so. Will you be careful though?"

"Yeh, sure. I want something to eat now. Anything left?"

"Lots." She shoved toward him the dish of fried potatoes. It was easier not to have Ed there; he would

complicate matters just by his silent presence. Yet his sulkiness oppressed her, clouding the tangle of everything else. Would it really make him sick again? These influenza cases that developed into pneumonia, she had read, often left unsuspected disorders. This conflict, by lowering his resistance, might bring one of them out. What would it be?

If only he would talk, telling her all he thought, calling her names, inventing fresh wrongs, as her father and mother had used to do. . . . If he would only talk and relieve himself she might then, with the help of the Isis books, convince him that under the circumstances, with bills mounting and decisions to make without his advice, she had done the best her lack of experience had permitted.

Lack of experience? But what had prevented him from making the money, instead of playing around in a long delusion? Five years were enough to give any man a chance. He'd had a chance with the Isis; then she had taken hers. He'd have to come round, that was all, if she were to go on with him. . . .

If she were to go on with him? . . . But she couldn't do anything else. In some way or other he'd have to find out that she'd done the best she could. Time and health would do it. Some night soon she'd get him down to the Isis, and the sight of the fuller house would touch him to activity again, he'd begin to have ideas, and be himself instead of only a bigger boy who didn't want to come to his meals. And as for Mat: well, Mat and Seraphine about cancelled each other, though she'd hardly be so foolish as to tell Ed, as he had told her—though he hadn't told her anything she hadn't known, as Mat had pointed out in the course of hinting at a great deal that she didn't know and that Ed hadn't mentioned. She couldn't tell Ed, anyway. She wasn't in love with Mat, and being in his arms made her not so much aware of

him as of herself. She was alive again, for the first time in years.

Here, as she remembered, her partial contentment, strangely arisen from what had been shame, validated her, ceasing only when she continued trying to reason, or to say of Mat that she did or didn't "love" him; for the only way in which she could think of him was to call herself "in love" or "not in love." Yet away from him she preserved only a grotesque image of his hungrily receptive face and the broken desire in his eyes.

Fundamentally it was not Mat but the result of him that she ruminated. As an unidentified instrument he floodingly released in her what had been long forgotten, and was now, under his manipulation, recalled to startle her—until consciousness advanced through her body, and her mind was a remembrance of the secret and vital colors of darkness. She had gone to him, in a moment, not to create a new relation but to remember. Finally, that would be insufficient, but in that direction, at present, she did not gaze.

2

On Wednesday she urged Ed to come to the Isis with her: "Just to watch things and to see the books. I want to show 'em to you. You're well enough, the doctor said you were. Weeks you been well now."

He reshuffled the deck of cards with which he had been playing solitaire. "No, I'm not going. You started it and you can finish it. I'll wash dishes, do housework. . . . In fact, I'm the new maid at the Somers's."

"You're the damn' fool at the Somers's, you mean." She slammed the door and ran down the stairs, but on the sidewalk she slackened her pace. Had she been cruel? He didn't have all his strength back yet. "But he is," she exclaimed to herself. "He's a fool, fool, fool. He's a fool, fool, fool." And to that rhythm she walked past

the familiar bricks and the billboards—crude with black print, mucous pink, analine blue—until she reached the Isis.

3

Monday brought a telegram from Phil. Her father was undoubtedly dying this time. She placed the telegram on Ed's triangle of outspread cards. "You'll have to take hold now," she informed him. "You can see I can't go and leave it with Johnson. I don't trust him and neither do you, really, outside the projection room."

"Nope, you can leave it with him. I said I wouldn't help and I won't." He rose, as if to end the dispute, and walked to the window.

"But my father's dying. Can't you understand that? He's dying, I tell you."

"He was the last time."

"If you knew Phil you'd never say that. Phil wouldn't waste any money on a telegram to send me a lie."

"Who sent it last time?"

"Who sent it? It was a letter from ma, but what does it matter? Oh, you fool, you fool, you damn', damn' fool!"

She returned to the Isis. Stubbornness locked itself in her. She would not go, not until Ed was seated in the box office, putting in the cash drawer himself the quarters that would come nearer to filling it.

Not on that day nor the next did either speak, except to Gerald. The time wore heavily on, and Arlie spent much of it on the street between home and the Isis, returning to the rooms frequently in the hope that Ed had relented, that his stubbornness might have worn itself down. It was not so much that she wanted to go to Coon Falls as that she wanted Ed at the Isis.

In the rooms she exhibited various pretexts for her

return: a forgotten handkerchief, a dose of cough medicine—elaborately taken in the dining-room while he bent over his cards—a broken shoe lace which had to be re-strung, and which she had cut her fingers in breaking just before she went up the stairs. But he said nothing, and each time she slammed herself out of the room. On the last visit she made, on the second day of their silence, he was not there. She inquired of Mrs. Gelke. Yes, he had gone out; had his coat and muffler on.

When she returned late that night he was in bed. So pervasively occupied had she been in breaking his obstinacy that as she lay in hard silence beside him she had forgotten the occasion of it all. It was a condition without cause. At breakfast another telegram reminded her: "Father died this morning at five-thirty. Funeral Friday afternoon." She decided at once not to go until Thursday night, thus missing as much of the horribly vacant interval as possible. She knew that interval, and knew also that there was no debt she could pay her father by a prolonged presence. At night she packed a few articles in the suitcase and put it in the closet, where Ed would probably not see it. She had not told him of the telegram and she did not intend to tell him until just before she left.

In the quiet of the night, while she waited for the tears that she felt ought to come, the long minutes swept over her, measured by the breathing of Ed and of Gerald, one heavy, one light. Gerald's breathing, coming from his bed around the corner in an ell of the room, she could just distinguish. Ed's was heavy and near. At times they synchronized, then ranged themselves at irregular intervals, and distantly rhymed again. Her father's breath had stopped. Her own would, some time . . . when? . . . It didn't matter; might as well stop now. No—life might hold something yet. . . . Mat? . . .

Maybe. . . . Herself anyway. She'd know, some time. She felt like crying now, but not for her father.

4

She had Gerald meet her at six o'clock at the Isis and took him to a restaurant for dinner. "Was Ed going to eat at Gelke's?" she asked Gerald when he came. He often did now, paying her a sum she was glad to get.

"Guess so."

"What was he doing?"

"Making things with cards."

"Did he say anything?"

"Uh-uh. . . . Mother, don't you like Ed any more?"

She looked down at his face, a wide-eyed miniature of his father, with a look about the eyes, however, that was hers. Ed had often pointed it out. "Of course I like him. I'm busy, that's all. What did you do at school to-day?"

They ascended the stairs just before seven o'clock. "How'd you like to stay at Gelke's till Ed comes for you? Mother has to go away tonight, dear, on the train; and she spoke to Gelke, so it's all right."

"Where you going?"

"I'll tell you about it some other time. And when I come back I'll bring you something nice to play with."

"Will you bring me some skates?"

"Yes, I'll bring them. Here we are. Just run along in, and good-bye." She kissed him, and for once, possibly because the hall was dark, he kissed her unhesitatingly, frankly, and his young lips were sweet and cold. Then he was running in to tell Gelke of the skates. His hands worked at the buckles of his coat as he talked, Gelke's door closed, and she opened her own.

Ed was still playing solitaire on the dining-room table. She went past him without a word, reappeared with her

suitcase, and sat down beside him. "Time for solitaire's up, Ed. Read this." She brought out of her pocket the last wrinkled telegram and spread it before him. Pack in hand he read it and recommenced his count.

"Time up," she said. "I'm going. Going on the eight-ten, and if you don't take charge of the Isis no one will. It's your show-shop, not mine. I haven't said a word to Johnson, you'll have to do that yourself. I'm through. And if you're not running it by the time I get back it'll have to run itself."

He held a red jack poised above a red queen, then let it drop to the pack, and the pack and his hands to the table. "All right," he said, pushing the cards away, "you win. I can't even beat solitaire."

He struggled into his overcoat, and not finding his hat put on one of Gerald's stocking caps, stretching it over his head to a snug fit. She hadn't seen him in his overcoat since the previous winter; it looked much too big for him.

Silently they neared the Isis, and in the glare of the light she saw that his face bristled with a three or four days' beard. "Sorry I didn't tell you in time to shave," she said.

"Don't matter," he answered, turning in and leaving her. "It won't keep away any the roughnecks we're playing to now." She paused, watching him advance across the lighted lobby, a certain savageness animating his gaunt figure, so clumsily and loosely covered in the baggy coat, and coming to so absurd a point in the stretched blue stocking cap. Then the doors swung shut.

She turned, hesitated, went slowly back to the rooms, where she moved about as if her eyes were focussed on some object beyond the walls. Moving as in a dream she cleared a space on the table by shoving back the cards and wrote:

"Dear Mat:

"I'll arrive in Des Moines sometime between six and seven on Saturday night at the Northwestern station. Meet me then and we'll go to dinner.

"ARLIE."

On her way to the train she mailed the note.

5

"Minor, Minor," the brakeman cried.

It seemed hours to Arlie since she had come forward to the chair car when the Pullman had been detached, yet it had been only three stations ago. She was still an hour and a half from Coon Falls. The name "Minor" recalled to her that she was nearing Finley. She had risen early so that she would not miss the town. Possibly she could see the bungalow where she and Herb had lived, or the bank. Finley was the next station.

It came, a gray disturbance in the landscape, a thickening of barren trees, a stretch of huddling houses. She strained nearer the window. No, she couldn't see the bungalow; it was hidden by the blue-gray Wentling house. Anyway, she would be able to see the bank where Herb had worked. When the train crossed Main Street she could see that.

The car in which she rode stopped squarely in front of the station. A short procession of people strung along the side of the car. Voices rose. The drayman sauntered by. She heard the slam of trunks. Maroon boards of the station—why didn't they go on? There: yes, Main Street, and the bank, two Fords at the curb, and the dray going up the street with a single trunk. And there was the drug store where she had seen Ed that day, and the grocery next door where she had bought the butter. But it was impossible that she had ever been there, that she had lived in this town almost a year. It

had to her only the uncanny familiarity of a town to which one moves knowing it is going to become familiar. In the years between, through the war and all, it had gone on, being itself; and she not of it. It was actual but woven through with presences less real than ghosts.

"Well, if it ain't Mrs. Shuman!"

Arlie started, and looked around at a woman standing by her seat, travelling-bag in hand.

"I'm going to sit right down by you. Funny we'd meet again this way."

"Oh, it's . . . Mrs. Weaver!"

"Sure, didn't you recognize me?"

"Why yes, of course. I was just startled, thinking about something else."

"Where you going? Up to Lawson?"

"No, Coon Falls. My father's dead. Going to his funeral."

Mrs. Weaver condoled as she settled herself. "Going up to Mapleton myself for a few days. . . . It's so far I was just dreading this trip, but now we can have quite a chat."

Mrs. Weaver chatted. All Arlie could do was to ask questions about people who were little more than names. When Mrs. Weaver turned from them to ask Arlie about herself some vague instinct of defence asserted itself: she was working in Grand Forks, in a moving picture show; had been running the show, in fact, during the illness of the proprietor; she didn't know but that she might start out in the business for herself. Yes, Gerald had been going to school all year. . . . Of her marriage to Ed she did not speak at all, and was largely indifferent to all. Mrs. Weaver had to say until the latter broke across a short developing silence with lowered but eager voice. "Oh! I forgot to tell you about Gracia Wentling! You know what a churchwoman her mother is? Well, Gracia had a baby. Her mother almost went crazy."

"Gracia! That little thing! Why, she used to take care of Gerald!"

"Little! But my dear, you haven't seen her for five years. She's twenty, anyhow. And she won't tell who the father is, though everybody knows. At least they think they do."

"Well for goodness' sake. . . . Tell me about it," Arlie urged. She visualized Gracia—taller, buxom, vivid—and her thought reached out for all the details Mrs. Weaver could give, reached out in avid interest. "Well, I'd never have thought that of Gracia!" she said at last when Mrs. Weaver paused in the midst of her suppressed recital.

"No one would, Mrs. Shuman. That's what shocked people so. We knew she'd been awfully lively and out for a good time and all, but not *that!* . . . I suppose it was the war, though. So many girls seemed to go wild then."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"But she's not wild now, I can tell you. Never pokes her head out of the house, and neither does her mother. Don't know over one or two who's seen the baby. Once I heard it cry when I was passing the house. Mrs. Wentling give up all her church work, as I said. *Never* goes out."

"Coon Falls next stop . . . Coon Falls." Again the brakeman.

"Great heavens, already!" Arlie gasped.

"Oh, and I meant to tell you, too. I was going to write it once. Such a little thing, though. But it was a satisfaction to me, all right. Mr. Weaver went out a couple of days after the accident, you know"—her voice hushed itself. "He'd lost his watch, somehow. Well, he found it, and he found that rabbit, too, the one that got in front of the car. It musta been run over before the accident. Had its head all smashed. It just wasn't

anything, he said. I don't know why, but it did give me a heap of satisfaction to know it got what was coming to it. As I said, I was going to write, but I just didn't, somehow."

"Coon Falls."

Arlie stood up and looked at Mrs. Weaver stupidly. "The rabbit . . . oh, yes." Then, with no word of good-bye she blundered down the aisle.

6

Phil reached for her suitcase. "Expected you yesterday anyway. Why didn't you come? Or when I sent the first telegram? Think I'm throwing money away?"

They crossed the platform to a Ford, into the back seat of which Phil tossed the suitcase and went to crank the car.

"I couldn't come before, Phil," she explained. "Ed's been sick, you know, with pneumonia."

"Oh, has he? Say, that's tough. Well, if it's any comfort to you, pa wouldn't have known you, anyway. Couldn't recognize any of us the last few days."

7

The coffin rested on its standards in the parlor. She could look down at the face for only a moment. His hair was even whiter than before; it was of an immaculate frostiness, a frozen and silver light above the dusky face with its high features, all blind now, driven beyond even the thought of peace and absent from fear. A sickly odor of carnations hovered in the vacancy of the room, and to the face clung a few specks of powder, flat white; it seemed as if the sweetish odor were exhaled from the powder. By that odor she was choked, unable to cry, and unable also to look longer at that face. She

turned to her mother, who stood by the door, weeping softly. Arlie went to her and kissed her loose cheek. Her mother broke out afresh. Arlie stood by, helplessly, patting the soft shoulder. "There, there, ma. Don't cry. It's all for the best. There . . . there. . . ."

CHAPTER XXVIII

PROVINCIAL

I

ON their return from the funeral the house became busy, in a subdued way, as they packed. Phil was eager to have his mother and the furniture at the farm; and the family that was to rent the house was coming on Tuesday.

The evening wore on through a great brightness, for Phil insisted that a light burn in every room. "Folks'll think we're having a party or something," his mother objected. "Let 'em," he answered. "But with you and the rest of us running everywhere to get something, you don't want to bother with no lights."

Arlie found it impossible to be of much service. Nothing she did was the right thing for her mother; every question was referred to Debbie, who, excited and voluble, sorted and folded quilts, blankets, and linen. These were to be the furnishings she and Phil had not been able to buy when they were married. Now they examined chairs, measured carpets, and debated the room in the farmhouse and the position in the room each article was to occupy. As they talked thus Mrs. Gelston was silent; for silence was part of the price she would be paying for a home. When Phil and Debbie went upstairs for another carpet she turned to Arlie. "Of course the rent'll give me more'n enough for clothes," she said.

"After I'm gone, too, I suppose the house'll have to go to Phil, Arlie. Your pa left it all to me, and I told Phil I'd leave it to him. It wouldn't be more'n right, you know, and then"—she bent over the barrel in which she was packing china—"Shuman left you some money, anyway, and I don't suppose they'd ever see you in want, even if you did marry again."

"I know, ma. That's all right. I'll always be able to take care of myself."

Her mother said no more for a time, and Arlie withdrew to the contemplation of what had made the funeral so irrelevant and absurd. Her father had died, she felt, when she had left him on that July afternoon in the previous summer. He had been lying in his coffin in the parlor ever since, waiting for any accidental day on which to be buried. She had happened to come home on that day.

At last she went upstairs to her own room. The mirror had been taken from the body of the dresser and leaned against the wall, slanting the room awry; the scrim curtains were gone; the carpet was rolled; one chair remained. Only the wallpaper and the dim brown bed were as before.

While Phil and Debbie and her mother worked on she lay wakeful. It was the last night in the old house, in this her room, and the bed. . . . It was in this bed that Gerald had been born, and here she had been married to Herb. On many a dreaming night she had lain here (had it really been she, or somebody else?), longing for a sight of Herb again; had flailed at her body, when she had been pregnant, in moments of blind fear, when she had shrunk from the town and its moving circle of hostile faces, faces of those who had laughed, sneered, and snouted into her life, faces eager with talk. They would always talk, just as Mrs. Weaver had about that poor little Gracia Wentling.

She sat up with a shock. Talk? She had talked herself, and about Gracia, pressing from Mrs. Weaver all the possible details. And at the time, on the train, she had even felt a repulsed avidity, a sickening greed for more and more.

Exactly what did it mean? Arlie Gelston and Gracia Wentling—what was the real difference between them? She had deserted each—had Arlie Somers. And Arlie Somers was so very definitely a third person. Gracia Wentling and the old Arlie were closer to being one than were Arlie Somers and Arlie Gelston. She, whoever she was, was driven into a new and barren region where there was no home. . . . Confusion faded into a tense vacancy. She burrowed into the old bed, as if in its warm encompassing she might find an answer; she waited, but none came. The others went to bed at last, the lights were all out, the house was dark. Alone she was wakeful, staring as if to discover with widened eyes what lay concealed in the obscurity; but what was there was not to be revealed, if indeed it existed at all. That much, after deepening hours, was harrowingly clear, though still, alternately restless and stone silent, she gazed with straining unfocussed eyes into the darkness; and over her the silence and ancientry of night persisted. "I don't know enough to think about it," she whispered at last. "I don't know how; oh, I don't. . . ."

In the morning, though the trouble of the night had not vanished nor been solved, it had, with the gray coming of light, receded so that momentarily she could treat it as something to be laughed out when the day should be stronger. It had to fade with daylight, with the open brilliance of the sun; and she watched the low clouds hopefully—less hopefully as the morning widened to a noon of gray sky, dull light.

She realized then what all morning should have been apparent, that Debbie, Phil, her mother, expected her to

take the afternoon train. She had no reason for staying, she told herself, yet she was not ready to go—despite all the subtle presences of the group and even of the old house which were compelling her to go. If it had only been summer she would have walked until she found what she wanted to do; but it was winter, and the house was too full.

Hence train time found her buying a ticket not for Grand Forks but for Des Moines, and not so much because she wanted to carry out her plan of seeing Mat as that she did not want, yet, to return to Grand Forks and Ed. When she had written her note she had intended to go to Des Moines. Now, immersed in her inability to plan anew, and in the absence of fresh impulse, the memory of the old commanded her.

2

Mat met her at the station, and when they had eaten dinner he took her in a taxicab to his rooms. So far she had been acquiescent, their talk had been trivial, and though Mat's question at last, "Shall we go to the rooms now?" had been critically eager, her reply had been, if a little unexpected by him, still very quiet: "If your rooms are some place where a person can rest and think a little, yes."

The street along which the taxicab sped was dingy with smoke-colored snow, but before they reached the apartments it had taken on a thin cover of freshly fallen white. Outside the door their feet marked the sidewalk with shadows. There was a lonely concrete staircase, a corridor, and then the welcome of the already lighted rooms. Since the lights had been left on Mat must have been very sure of her coming, she thought as she gave her coat into his hands and let him draw her galoshes from her feet. As he fumbled with the buckles she

glanced about. Through one door ajar she glimpsed white tile and towels. A third door, probably to the bedroom, was closed. Strange, to penetrate so far into Mat's life, and to note the influence of her impending arrival in the order of the magazines on the table, the well cleaned ash-tray under the green-glassed mission lamp, the carefully closed box of stogies. It was from the very table by which she sat that he must have written her.

"There," he said, "are you comfortable now?"

"Perfectly."

"Probably pretty well tired, aren't you?"

"Not so much as you'd think. Sit down, Mat—no, over there. And smoke up. It'll be easier for you."

"Easier, how do you mean?"

"I don't quite know yet."

His hand trembled as he held the match flame to his cigarette. Calmly she watched it. He was trying so hard to appear usual, but his movements were only a compromise between overeagerness and fear. His attitude inflected hers, she was not so sure of herself now, and if she lost what assurance she had, she could fall back only on confusion. Tense again, she attempted to think toward clearness, until her thoughts swirled and went out, leaving her vacantly yet solidly before him. An alarm clock somewhere ticked on, and silence grew heavy about them, enveloping them in closer community. If it became closer, its invisible pulsations uniting them, she might not be able to control it as she wanted. Words must break it. Anything: "Well, it's apparent you got my note all right?" (But she had said that before.)

"Yep."

"But you know, in a way I'm sorry I mailed that note, or wrote it at all, since I didn't write more."

"Why so?"

"Well . . . we haven't had much to say since we got

here, have we? We just kept still, and the stillness, it got to meaning things it shouldn't of. And I don't blame you—or it, I guess I mean. It's this way: the note only told you to meet me, didn't it? and you did, and we didn't have much to say during dinner, and then you said should we go to the rooms. And here we are. Then—well—naturally you'd feel, with neither of us saying anything, that pretty soon it'd break, and we'd—be together somehow, didn't you?"

"Well, naturally I expected something, since you put it that way."

"Yes, and I'm sorry it got going, because—this is what I'm trying to say: it's just that all the time now, right this minute, we're getting farther apart, and it's hard to tell you, but I don't want you to be thinking anything else, even if I have given you reasons for thinking otherwise. It's . . ."

The silence descended on them again. With lowered face Mat eyed the eddying smoke of his cigarette.

"It's—don't you see, Mat? If I hadn't come out here it'd been hard talking to you in a restaurant or station somewhere. And then I wanted to come, to come all the way, to be here alone with you, just to show you I wasn't afraid—no, not that exactly; there's nothing to be afraid of, I suppose—but to make you understand that I mean what I'm going to say, or rather that I mean what I'm going to do, because I'm not sure I can say much more."

"What is it you mean to do?"

"I'm going back to Ed on the eleven o'clock train."

"You're going back to Ed! Why, you just come from him."

"I know, and I'm going back. I can't tell you just why. You see, I been thinking I was one person all along, and really I been getting to be somebody else. I've gone back on what I used to be, and on another kid

too. I—I didn't think I had it in me to, but something the other day—on the train it was—showed me; and to stay here with you would just muddle me up so I wouldn't be anybody. I'd—”

“Arlie, what's the hell's the matter with you? You talk like you were crazy!”

“I know, maybe I am. All the same . . .” A perverse laughter was coming from inexplicable sources. “All the same”—and as the laughter came Mat stood and was by her chair, putting his arm about her shoulder.

“Look here, kid, this is no laughing matter for either of us. You came to me and you're going to stay with me. You're going to be here all night, and tomorrow night, and every day and night, and right away we'll be in Chicago—I can work out of there now if I want to—and you're no more going back to Grand Forks than you're going to the moon. Hear me?”

“I hear you all right,” she answered, “but it won't do any good now. I knew I couldn't explain to you when I can't to myself. That's the trouble. I just come up against a stone wall every time I try, and I don't know enough to find a way around, or to climb over it. It's too much for my brain. I came here just to have it out with you for good and all. I wanted to be finished with it.”

“But there's just one way, Arlie; we care too much; you know that as well as I do.”

“I don't believe I know anything as well as you do—or as well as any one does.” She broke away from his releasing arms and went to the window. Hesitantly he followed. “No, keep away,” she said, and he retreated. Her coming had been no good, she thought; there was no clear way out. Herb, Ed, Mat—she hadn't succeeded with any; nor had they with her. Nor had she with herself.

Tilting back the drawn curtain she looked out. The

light was soft and dim; she could feel rather than see the snow still falling through the gray glimmering. The streets were full of snow, and full of night. A girl was passing on the opposite sidewalk, her shoulders hunched forward; she cut across the corner under the light. Going somewhere. If only she were like that girl, with somewhere to go, to go clearly and with confidence. . . . She let the curtain fall into place.

Mat still stood irresolute, his hand on the table, a stubby hand with flattened fingers, the fingers that had touched her. The hand was alone under the light. The light glowed upon its yellow flexible pallor. There was nothing in the world but the yellow hand that had touched her. Touched Arlie Somers, not Arlie Gelston—who dwelt in years long gone and closed. Gracia lived in those years also, with a friend Arlie.

If those years should break, letting the confusion flow out to engulf this later self, then the three of them could be together, companionable because they would be outside what Arlie Somers was within, talking like the rest, acting like the rest—Mrs. Weaver, Mrs. Holcomb. . . . But there was no way of becoming like Gracia. Mrs. Weaver and Mrs. Holcomb were not concerned; it was for Arlie Somers only to reduce herself, to know, by some later change, that she was with Gracia and Arlie Gelston. What did Iowa care that she had suffered through the night, and would again, because she had talked as she had to Mrs. Weaver? There was nothing to tell anybody else, only something to tell herself, if at last she could.

But she could not do again what once she had done. She had loved Herb with blinded eyes, she had been utterly his own, blurring into him. That had not been repeated with Ed, nor could it be with Mat, who lived always, in the closest moments they had shared, apart and even remote. And there was no one else to love.

Ed, who here could mean nothing, and Mat . . . Mat! Could she, through Mat, who was too remote to love, who left her always coldly outlined, only remembering—could she, by him, because he would be a gross insistence and a repulsive pain, reduce herself from arrogance to what she had been? His hand lay on the table, the light lay on the hand, the light immobile, the hand alive. Drawing her toward it, the hand; not knowing she moved, closer, closer. The hand was gone, Mat fronted her, her own hands were on his shoulders, his fingers on her arms; their warmth stirred memory of seclusion—and of small minutes that within were heavily vast as their mysterious work was done. Closer to her own came his hot body, and against him in the darkness she was aware of each subtle and huge change of their union. Suddenly she was passionate and savage as she felt his thighs tremble, and for a towering moment was pliant to him.

Then, gaining each widening instant of separation by tearing him vitally from her, she pressed him back, and the arm with which she had levered him away she held in front of her, defensively, as she retreated to a chair. Her arm, still a few inches from her head, in a moment dropped. Breathing rapidly she let go into a profound exhaustion, and the green half-light of the room glimmered through her closed eyes.

She heard him advancing toward her again, and knew she wanted him to come; but because she wanted him she feared. Upward in the malign green depth, darkening with menace, she felt the overwhelming of remote and brainless cause—Grendel again. If only Mat were compelled upon her by that shapelessness, then, at last, she could accept and use him, letting him take her as he would, in what would be to her a torture resolving in pain her disharmony. Even though Grendel persisted, she would be herself again. But because she wanted him not altogether in pain she was held where she had

been. Not Mat was compelled but her own desire, so that forever she would fear, and be torn apart before that fear; or else, wanting him and yielding, sink into extinction.

He was moving again—

"Don't!" she cried, and raised her arm as if to ward him off. "Wait—a minute anyway. Not yet." She had been speaking through darkness. When her eyes opened on the room she found him watching her in resolute stupidity. "I . . ." she began.

"You act like I's going to hit you," he said resentfully. "What is it? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No, you didn't hurt me. It was just myself. Let me rest a minute . . . and don't talk."

The alarm clock ticked on through the silence. The clock must be on the table somewhere; on a shelf at the other end. Was it late? They hadn't left the restaurant until eight-thirty, it had taken a little while to ride out, and they had been here—she didn't know how long: maybe only a few minutes, but the time seemed hours. Shortly she must move again, put on her things, somehow get out and down to the station. That would involve keeping Mat where he was, staving him off until she could be away.

"But Arlie—" He was beginning again. "I don't understand. Here you come to me and I know you love me, and I do you. I always have. Yet you act like something was the matter, instead of everything being all right."

She roused to meet this, to comprehend it; then: "Yes, but the point is I *don't* love you, not really. I've just tried to think I did. All I done is to fool myself because there didn't seem to be anything else left. Then you made me want you and . . . if I didn't want you, you could get me, and somehow I could set things straight with myself. But now I know I want you, I can't. It'd

just always be to me I hadn't anything else to go on. And there wouldn't be any risk about it. Not any more for me there wouldn't. I have to go just like I was when I come here—as long as I'm anything at all. And, O Mat, don't—don't pester me with yourself. It's all I can do all alone, without you worrying me."

"Why, I wouldn't worry you. Honest I wouldn't, only—"

"Only you just can't keep from it, can you?" Her tone was sharp. Convulsively she sat up in her chair and toward him. "You think just about your own damn' self all the time, and keep at me and at me. I'd think you could see by this time I ain't what you think, that I ain't going to do what you want. I have enough trouble alone, I tell you, without you."

"But Arlie, I'm not keeping *at* you. It's only I'm trying to understand all this wild talk you been putting on and your acting the way you have. How the deuce you expect me to understand, when all the time I been thinking—" He was edging his chair closer.

"Stop it!" she cried.

"But—"

"Oh damn you, damn you, God damn you—I hate you so, I hate you!" She was on her feet by his chair, looking down at the bewilderment of his face; then toward that face her hand swung viciously, the blow muffed by his jerking arm. Yet she had reached him; the white mark on his face, reddening as he looked at her, clutching the hand which had struck him, told her that.

"Mat . . . oh, I didn't mean to. Forgive me. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I guess you don't, Arlie. I . . . I never expected anything like that from you."

He was still clutching her wrist, but as the grasp relaxed she withdrew. "It's time for me to go, all right,"

she said. "There's no use staying. There's nothing we can do."

"There'd be a lot, Arlie, if you'd listen to me. I didn't mean to push things. It was more your walking over to me than anything else. I know it'd take time, probably, but why not take it? You could go on to Chicago and wait for me. I could be there for good in a couple of weeks; and even then, if you weren't ready, why we could chum around until you were. Afterwards things could be arranged with Ed, and not too much publicity either. What little there was wouldn't matter; we'd be away from everybody we'd known, mostly. . . . I never talked to you much about money. Not at all I ain't, but I'm making six thousand a year, and—"

"Don't, Mat. It's no good. You know it ain't. I'm sorry I hit at you but it's done and I can't undo it and I can't go to Chicago with you. All the farther I can go is to the station with you—tonight. And I wish you'd go and order a taxi now."

If he would go—for only a few minutes—in the loneliness of the room she could get together again, enough to face people at least.

"You just wait a bit," he broke in, "before we get any taxi. There's plenty time yet."

"Of course I can go on a street car. It's only that I didn't know where to get one in this part of town. And I was going to pay for the taxi myself, so you needn't worry about that."

"Now look here, girl, you know I'm not as cheap as that. I've never been quite that bad, have I? Then why d'you say anything like that?"

She shouldn't have said it. The same impulse that had struck the blow had spoken the words. For some reason she had wanted to hurt him. To have him wince was a small healing in her, yet not one that lasted.

After all, there had always been kindness in Mat. "It was . . ." she began. "I only thought that—well, since I was going to use it to leave you, it'd be rubbing it in to have you pay for it. . . . And I'm too tired out not to take it. I didn't tell you, but the reason I was in Coon Falls was because my father was buried yesterday. I was coming back from his funeral, and . . . it's all too much."

"Why, you poor kid!" He rose and started toward her—then checked himself. "Why didn't you tell me before? How could I know? You make me feel like a damn' mut. I wouldn't of brought you out here if I'd known that."

"That was all right. I was willing to come, like I told you before. I needed somewhere to rest a little. It'd been all right if we hadn't got started."

"I didn't realize, not for one second, Arlie. I'd never of gone on so."

"But it's *all right*, I tell you." She couldn't keep the tinge of impatience out of her words. "If you'd just go now and order the taxi."

"No need of going out. I can order it here." He pointed to the telephone on the wall.

Wasn't she going to gain the few minutes alone? "I hadn't noticed," she said. "But Mat, you go out and order it anyway. It'd rest me just to be alone a little. Please."

"Sure thing. I'll go right away." Energetically he put on his coat, and with a wistful look back at her was gone.

Why had she used her father's death for such a purpose? The funeral hadn't tired her. Her father had been dead since last July. It was only being herself that had tired her. But she had needed to be alone, yes, even at the expense of so dim a disloyalty to her father. He wouldn't care; he had always loved her, and she him.

He would be wholly willing, if he knew, that she use him so. His love was so great that her action would be lost in it. Or had his love been only for Arlie Gelston? Yet that afternoon when she had talked with him, surely it had been Arlie Somers who had sat by his bed. He would love both of her, and if he were alive perhaps he could heal this division in her, or at least give her something else to think about until its pain faded. It would fade. After years it would, because whatever it was you felt with dried up, went out. She could never again love anybody as she had loved Herb. Even with Ed it had been different. Perhaps it was this that made her unable really to love Mat. If she had loved him she would have wanted to love him with the help of Ed, to talk him over with Ed, who was so much a part of her, really . . . Arlie Somers. She'd be going back to him when Mat came with the taxicab. If so, she must be getting her hat on, her galoshes, her coat.

She buckled her galoshes first—it would be better to have that done—and as she did so glanced again at the table with its neat pile of magazines; piled so, she was sure, because of her coming. When she had her things all on she must disarrange that pile, so that it would not be a reminder to Mat.

But when she had done so, standing by the table in her coat and hat, Mat had still not come. She went to the window. He might already be below with the taxi. The street was empty of all but unchanging light, and through it the snow fell, leisurely descending, lifting and falling, touching the window pane.

Then Mat's steps quickened along the corridor, he paused in front of the door, and she turned to face him.

"Oh, you're ready?" he said.

"Yes—did you order it?"

He hesitated before answering. "I been walking around in the snow, trying to see a way through, so it'd

be settled somehow. . . . No, I didn't order it. I thought I could from here anyway. You still want it?"

"I—I got to go somehow."

"All right then. It's for you to say. . . . It always has been, Arlie," he added softly, and took the receiver from the hook. Watching him as he gave the address she understood how his former assurance had been, all along, only the emphasis of his need for her.

3

"Looks like it'd stopped snowing," Mat said when they had settled themselves in the taxicab, which was drawing away from the apartments. Arlie glanced out. Yes, a suggestion of moonlight lay behind paling clouds, but here were more flakes on the glass. "Not yet, I guess," she answered, and reclining again was surprised to find sobs gathering in her throat. Mat was silent in his corner; she wanted to throw herself across the little distance separating them and cry in his arms, be comforted there, and tell him all there was to be told. If only that could be done! But it couldn't. She wouldn't be able to explain, Mat wouldn't understand, and would think she wanted him again.

They were on Walnut Street already. People hurried, street cars clamored, the advancing automobiles combed the white street with pale gold. Then they had turned and were passing the courthouse, a huge smoky mass vanishing into the night.

The station was packed with outgoing people. Hardly could they find a place for her to sit while Mat purchased her ticket. She had tried to refuse to let him, wanting for herself the occupation of waiting in the long line. But nervous and abrupt he had insisted, and after a little argument she had given in.

There was more argument when he tried to pay for it,

returning to her with the ticket and bill she had pressed on him. "Since you're going," he had said, nettled, "you might as well let me speed you along that much. It'd be something for Ed."

Until he had said that she had prolonged the argument artificially, even gayly, feeling it was easier to talk so than to find other indifferent matters. "Take it," she snapped, "and keep the change."

But the change he carefully counted, down to the last penny, and pressed it into her palm. Latching her purse she sat silent by his side, watching the crowds and hearing the trains called. There was still some time to wait, and that time was not going to be easy, she realized, if they continued thus. At last, sharply, she sent him off to look up the train again and in his absence bought a magazine at the news-stand. On his return they chatted trivially, of his probable move to Chicago, of the winter, but chiefly of the pictures they had seen; and relapsed into a long silence broken only when the train caller took up his lugubrious chant, from whose intoned obscurity the name "Grand Forks" clearly emerged. She started.

"There it is, Mat."

Silence held them a moment longer. Bound in that silence neither moved. Then both stood up, and as they entered the crowd funnelling through the gates he grasped her arm. On the cold outer platform she looked at him, but in the misted light she could see little; his face was shadowed by his hat. The engine gleamed and thundered past, and confused by the uproar she gave back, to be supported by strength and to have her arm grasped the tighter. She had not known he was so strong.

Slowly they followed the streaming line of overcoats and traveling-bags, to come at last to the dim outskirts of the blind mass seeking entrance to the train.

"Give me my suitcase now, Mat." She turned to him

and reached out her hand. His grasp on her arm relaxed, he touched her shoulder.

"I—I'll see you on all right," he said.

"No, don't. I want to go alone . . . I have to."

"Yes?"

It was a dumb moment. She knew only that he was near and that she was going. "Mat," she whispered, "Mat, kiss me good-bye." That would be safe now, and would make up for her striking him. She pressed closer, her hands on his coat collar. For a shadowing long instant he was nearer than he had ever been, yet they were apart. Then he had wrenched away and her face was lifted in surprise not to him but to the shock of empty light, down which the snow crowded from an indistinguishable sky.

Late-comers caught her into the warming drift of people, and suitcase in hand she was pushed and almost lifted up the steps into the vestibule. Down the long aisle she hurried to the very back of the car. After the cold outer air the closeness of the train oppressed her; yet it was good to be with many people again, and going somewhere. She worked at the plush chair until it snapped back to a comfortable angle, hoisted her suitcase to the rack overhead, and reclining into her coat gathered it around her. It would have been a waste of money to take a Pullman—what with the change and wait she would have to make at the junction. She would be very comfortable as she was. . . . And Mat had been right to go that way, refusing what she had so cheaply offered. It was just another place in which she had been askew. If there were time she would get off and tell him, but there wasn't—

The train was moving, past the shining and silent streets, past the close and ponderous silence of unpeopled buildings, past lonelier and dimmer streets, away from the city into the fields. Had it stopped snowing? The

moon would be breaking those clouds. . . . There was too much to think about, and there was no answer anyway. But Mat—he might come back to Grand Forks again, having waited until she had forgotten about her father's death. With no excuse he would be harder to deal with then. But she'd have to take the future when it came, and Ed's future with hers—even if it didn't lead beyond the Isis and never to that chain of movie palaces he talked about—creamy stone, glittering with electric designs, and inside, in the perfumed twilight, the marvel of the flying dream. Only the Isis with its dingied stucco, the pictures on the walls, and old and rainy films. But if Mat came insistently, she could be cruel again. It would be more satisfying, next time, to be cruel.

The lamps were out in the car, all but two. Suspended over the clicking rails she was being rushed on, past the unillumined farmhouses and the fields in their massive width and hush. On and down—with towns curving into the night behind as the train drove into air that was brightening. On and down—she had an inescapable sense now that the train was going down an incredibly long hill to Grand Forks. She opened her eyes to correct that—yes, level enough—but as she closed them the track dipped again.

It didn't seem possible, here in the train, that for a blind savage moment she had wanted Mat. If she had not been perversely compelled to want him, then this elusive pain of division would not yet be with her. She might have lost one pain within another. Or was this the price of not being utterly submissive to that profound compulsion? Only so could she stay herself, struggling, above extinction? Unless after years it went out, she with it—leaving Gerald. Drawing her coat closer she turned on her side. The unfolded collar shut off all light from the car. The flying air outside was brightening, but not enough to trouble. She might sleep.

In the semi-darkness her eyes were held shut by the weight of their weariness. . . . But when the strong moon broke the clouds at last and the fields knew for an hour the quiet flood, she was lifted into a sourceless cold brilliance. With the hour, with morning, it would disintegrate into separate and innumerable molds. Provincial by its own necessity it would shape itself into grotesque form and place. But Arlie, sleeping in release from Des Moines and the Isis, was aware only of her wide and vacant dream.

4

The outer staircase to their rooms was gray as ever as she climbed it in the morning. It couldn't have snowed in Grand Forks. Already the milkman had left the tall white bottles with their sloping shoulders, and Gerald's sled, with its bright runners, leaned against the railing. She stood in the hall before their own door. Ed would not be up yet, she thought, and then she heard him move.

"Why, Arlie!" he exclaimed as she stood before him. "Say, I didn't expect you so soon!"

"Are you glad to see me back, Ed?"

"You know damn' well I am." His hair, a duller yellow since his sickness—though she had not recognized the change before—was furiously rumpled. He needed to shave again, but not so badly as when she had left him at the Isis.

"Say, you know, Arlie, I'm awful sorry about your father—and the way I acted, too. . . . He was a fine old fellow. I'll always remember him."

"Yes, but I suppose it's better that way, Ed. He suffered so. . . . Is Gerald all right?"

"Sure; he was in just a minute ago. Staid with Gelke last night and she's making waffles for him. Shall I call him?" He moved toward the door, and when she an-

swered, "No, let him eat," came back to her. "You don't know how lonely I got, Arlie," he said. She withdrew from his arms and sat down.

It was the same room, with all the familiarities the years had given. Ed had seated himself at the table by his empty breakfast dishes and a pile of exhibitors' journals. "And the Isis, is that all right, Ed?"

His eyes avoided her as he answered. "Yes, the Isis is all right. I don't know but you did the best thing after all—though maybe it ain't making as much money as you thought."

"No . . . ?"

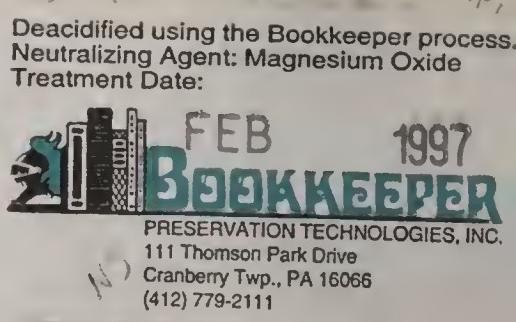
"The books wasn't quite right, I found. You'd forgot the insurance. But it'll keep us going; and if I do the projecting why we'll get along fine. You see, the whole picture business is shaky, it strikes me. Likely to flame up any time. If it does, why I can tinker watches again, I suppose; only I'm getting more interested in the projection end. It ain't never been worked right. Why, with only what I know now I showed Johnson a thing or two last night that give us pictures almost like we used to run, and if only I can project myself and we can save money, why . . ." His hand went to his hair again.

"Well, that's fine, Ed, that's fine." She would have to lie down, she was very tired. "Anyway," she continued, "we'll always have ourselves, won't we?"

For a moment they looked at each other, and neither gaze was steady. Rising, she crossed the room and stood beside him. His head was bent. She touched his shoulder, and when he looked up at her she took his face between her hands and looked as deeply as she could into his eyes. "Ed . . ." Her voice was unsteady, as her gaze had been. He did not speak, and his mute eyes gave no answer to the searching of her own. "Ed," she repeated, and he turned to kiss her hand.

Wearily she took her suitcase to the bedroom and began to unpack. Ed had not moved from the table. Then a noise filled the hall, a door slammed, and Gerald went down the outer stairs with his sled. He shouldn't do that. It was Sunday.

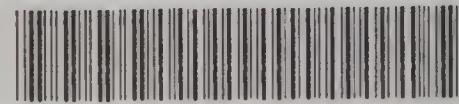
THE END



Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.
Neutralizing Agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date:



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